Dead Men, Dark Seas, and a Place for Us

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Dead Men, Dark Seas, and a Place for Us

by araccooninspace

Summary

The supernatural pirate AU we all deserve.

Captain Jack Crawford, famed pirate hunter, and his crew must track down the dread pirate Hannibal Lecter and his ship of terrors, the Chesapeake Ripper. But to do that, he'll need the help of an imprisoned and dubiously sane pirate who once sailed on the Ripper: Will Graham. The terrors of the seas await, and nothing is what Captain Jack believes it to be.

A Place Further from the Sea

Port Royal, May 1736

The gaolkeeper's cane tapped rhythmically on the stone floor, a sharp counterpoint to the jangle of keys and susurrus of voices. Somewhere, someone was singing softly, though Captain Jack Crawford had never heard the language before. The tune was maddeningly familiar and seemed in time with the distant roll of surf. He wished he could smell salt air, but this place stank of filth and human decay.

"So," asked the gaolkeeper, "What do you want with my patient, hm?" He was a small man with a limp and a smile like the bottom of a bottle of rum. "Is he a relative, perhaps?" There was a razor hidden in the jibe, ready to bite the hand that grasped it. Crawford ignored it and the gaolkeeper chuckled like it had been a harmless joke. "Perhaps you think he can help you find something? Ah, yes, of course, I can see it in your face. Well, you wouldn't be the first to think that."

They stopped in front of a heavy door set with an iron shutter. The singing, Crawford realized, was coming from within. He still couldn't recognize the language. Something of the Baltic, perhaps, words for dark winters and remembering pagan swords. The gaolkeeper, Chilton, faced Crawford with a serious expression. "Captain, you are clearly experienced with the sea so I hope you can tell the difference between what is and what isn't. This man is dangerous, and whatever you think he can give you, I promise you he will extract a cost. Be careful. He sees through people." Crawford realized with some surprise that there was genuine concern in Chilton's voice.

"I'll be careful," Crawford said.

Chilton nodded slowly and banged once on the shutter before sliding it aside and saying, "Someone to see you, prisoner."

The interior of the cell was dark, lit only by a slit window that let in only enough sunlight to accentuate the dark rather than alleviate it. Sitting on the bed was a man, lean and gaunt-faced. His hair was a tangled mop, crudely hacked, and one eye was hidden behind a leather patch. "Hello, Jack," he said, his voice soft and erudite. "What a marvellous surprise."

"You've heard of me, then?"

"Of course I've heard of the great Jack Crawford, the finest pirate hunter from Veracruz to La Reunion. Have you come to see I'm safely locked away? Or have you swept the seas clean and now come into this place to look upon the damned? Or... oh, yes. You're looking for something. And you think I can help." The man stood up and walked towards the door. As he stepped into the light Crawford could see the mess of scarring around the covered eye. He was still handsome, despite the disfigurement, though it was a cruel beauty.

"Not something, someone."

The prisoner laughed again, without mirth. “It must be fascinating quarry indeed if Captain Jack Crawford needs help.”

“Yes. I want you to help me catch Hannibal Lecter.”

There was sound behind Jack like Chilton had lost his footing briefly and needed to clutch his cane.

“And what makes you think a common pirate like me, one who got caught let’s not forget, can help you find a ghost story?”

“Hannibal Lecter is not a ghost story, neither is his ship nor the three villages he massacred last month.”

The prisoner was just on the other side of the bars now, close enough to kiss. “The *Chesapeake Ripper* has been seen? This isn’t just some rum-soaked tale you heard?”

“I saw it myself." Jack hesitated, just briefly, the lied, "For five minutes off the Carib coast before it vanished into a fog bank.”

“You were fortunate, then.”

“Maybe so.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you think I can help you.”

“Because,” Crawford said evenly, “before he became captain of the *Ripper*, Hannibal Lecter sailed with a man, so they say, who could see things no-one else could. A man named Will Graham.”

“Ah, so my secret is revealed at last.” Chilton made a strangled noise, and Will smiled faintly. Crawford realized with a hollow feeling that the entire conversation had been pretence. Graham had known Jack’s purpose before he had spoken. It had been a way to make Jack expose himself, even a little, and to twist some knife in Chilton’s belly. “How do you feel, Doctor Chilton,” Graham continued with a mocking lilt, “think of all the dinner invitations you could have had if they’d only known you could chill their high society spines with tales of me. Think of the monographs. It might have even be enough to let you show your face in London again. If only you had known.”

Crawford glanced back and saw the rigid rictus remains of a smirk on Chilton’s face. The doctor swallowed thickly once, worked his jaw and then turned and walked away. The tapping of his cane was an ellipsis leading to a paragraph recapping the petty indignities in the life of Doctor Frederick Chilton. An unhappy read that unlike its narrator was not short.

Jack turned back to the cell and found himself looking directly in the single blue eye of Will Graham. He gave himself credit for not flinching. After a moment, Graham looked away and gave that little smile again. “You should be careful of eyes, Jack. They show too much.”

“Even when they are lost?”

“Oh, you should always look to what is lost to see what can’t be found, Jack, and you’ll find it was never lost at all.”

“That’s very cute, but I didn’t come here to play word games with you.”

Graham stepped back, fading into the gloom until the light fell only across the ruined side of his face. “And why are you here, Jack? What brings you to this place that is farther from the sea than it really is?”

“I told you. I want to find Hannibal Lecter.”

“Then maybe you should start by looking in places he might be instead of places he definitely isn’t.”

“Well, you see, I think he is here, in fact I think he’s in there with you, all the time. You saw him more clearly than anyone, and I would like you to be my eyes.”

A long silence. The eyepatch stared back at Crawford flatly, contemptuously. Will Graham’s other eye lay in shadow, a sunless valley that peered out to the mountain peaks. “Maybe that’s true. What’s also true is the price of that seeing. I don’t think you’re blind to what a second look might cost.”

“I can protect you.”

Graham laughed harshly. “No you can’t. There is no safety from the *Chesapeake Ripper*. There is only remaining out of sight.”

“Are you out of sight, Will? I don’t think you are. I think you are insightful as no other.”

“That’s your view, is it?”

“That’s my view.”

“Well, my view is six inches of sky and the top of the gallows. That would need to change before I could view your offer in a better light. But changing my accommodations won’t be taken lightly by my gracious host.”

“The demands of the crown somewhat overshadow Chilton’s, I think.”

“Self-interest casts a heavy shadow.”

“I will enlighten him.”

Will Graham’s chuckle seemed to float out of his cell on the breeze, as though it had made sail and tide rather than be given velocity by Graham’s cold mirth. “I guess we’ll see then, won’t we, Captain?”

“Seeing is believing.”

“No. The other way around. You’ll need to remember that, if you go chasing Hannibal Lecter. Belief grants sight.” Graham turned away and lay back on his bunk, staring out the slit window to that six inches of sky and gallows. Crawford slid the shutter closed.

He turned to leave and stopped, suddenly aware of the sensation of being watched despite the empty corridor. There, across from Graham’s cell was another door, as heavily barred and shuttered. Into the frame someone had scratched long strings of text. Not English. Gaelic, perhaps? It put Crawford in mind of wards and thresholds. Superstition adding its own locks. Crawford snorted and walked away.

Beverly Katz was waiting for him at the top of the stairs, booted feet up on the table, cleaning her nails with a knife. The very picture of the insouciant, irreverent privateer. “Was it him,” she asked as Crawford walked up and began buckling his sword back on. “Did he give you a bearing?”

“It was him, Ms. Katz, it was him. But no bearing. Just a lot of talk. I think he sees this as a move in some game he plays with the warden of this place.” Jack paused. “He knew I was coming. Maybe not me specifically, but someone.”

Katz shrugged. “Someone was bound to eventually. He’s trying to rattle you.”

“No, this was something else. He knows something about why Lecter is sailing again now, after all these years.” He adjusted his belt, checked his sword in its sheathe and turned to the stairs.

“Where are you going, sir?” Katz asked.

“To make Graham’s move for him.”

“Do we really need his information that badly?”

Crawford thought about greasy smoke over the corpse of a town, a sinking ship and the human ruins within. “We really do.”

Dig Two Graves

Chapter Summary

The past haunts Jack, and he has an encounter with a certain nosy redhead.

Chapter Notes

Jumped the time setting forward to 1736 to line up with certain other events.

The boardwalk thumped under Jack Crawford's boots as he walked away from the prison, Beverly Katz tailing behind with her wide-brimmed hat pulled low. Jack tilted his face to the brilliant Caribbean sun and breathed the salt air in deep. After the dankness inside, it seemed brighter, sweeter.

"It isn't, though," Beverly said. "The sun shines just the same as it did when you went in there."

"I know. But it's easy to forget in a place like that, even after short time."

"Makes you wonder about trusting a man who's been in there for years."

"Will Graham lives in an abyss he carved into his own soul a long time ago. I doubt the surroundings of his physical body matter much to him anymore."

"You think he wouldn't stop to smell the salt air and feel the sun on his face?"

"Maybe. But it doesn't matter, because Will Graham is never leaving that prison."

Beverly folded her arms and regarded him evenly. Jack could only just see the glitter of her eyes in shadow of her hat. "Even if that's what it takes to catch Hannibal Lecter?"

"I will wrangle with Chilton to get him a cell with a view. I will listen to his metaphors and play his word games, but Will Graham is. Never. Leaving. That. Cell." A long, still pause. Jack lowered his finger, straightened his belt, and said, "Come on. We're getting stared at."

Beverly trailed along in his wake. "No, Jack," she said, almost inaudibly, "It's just you."

They walked down the hill from the prison, descending from a quiet stillness to the bustling hub of the Port Royal beach town. Voices, gulls, laughter, cooking food, stale beer, unwashed bodies, a babel of languages, dialects and accents tumbling over each other. Port Royal, the outstretched finger of the British Empire. It was dirty, violent, corrupt, greedy, and Port Royal was much the same. Still, there was at least an honesty to the place, here where men and women could be themselves without the stifling courtly pretensions of London.

There were a dozen ships in the harbour, along with a great ship of line, the *Irascible* of seventy-four guns, and a pair of nimble frigates, so the port was awash with sailors. The navy men stood out the most, in their beribboned hats and lovingly cared-for shore rig. Lascars and Scots speaking argot, pale Norwegians burning in the sun playing dice with Malay fishermen and finding common ground half a world from their homes, freedmen and slaves, and most of all the scrofulous tide of humanity with no origin more identifiable than the sea. Any of them, Jack knew, was as equally capable of astonishing bravery as of barbarous piracy (and that those could be the same thing at the same time). The brethren of the sea. And all of them watched by pairs of patrolling soldiers, sweating into their red coats and holding muskets with varying levels of care. The current garrison commander, Jack knew, meant well enough, but was out here where the Navy held sway for a reason.

“Yeah, that’s all well and good,” Beverly muttered from behind him, “But it looks like a pair of your brethren would like to reenact the first brotherhood.”

Jack stepped aside for a lady and her maid to pass and raised his hat with a courtly flair. He got a charming titter and a sly look at his pursuers. Two men in canvas and tar with shapeless hats pulled low who walked with menaces. Jack turned and walked on, attempting nonchalance despite the burning presentment of a bullet hole between his shoulders. Hopefully fear of the redcoats’ vigilance outweighed whatever their motives for murder were and this would be settled with steel.

He turned down an alley and followed it around a bend until he was out of sight of the road. Then he turned, drew his sword and dagger and waited. Behind him he heard the harsh rasp of Beverly doing the same.

The thugs rounded the corner and lurched to a stop, not expecting the rabbit to so calmly await the hounds. Rabbits don’t generally hold a few feet of steel, though. Perhaps that would be enough, Jack hoped. He lifted the point of his sword a trifle, and the men stiffened. The shorter, thick-necked and meanly made, held a boarding axe and a sailor’s knife. The larger wielded a heavy sugarcane machete. The third, almost obscured behind the other two, carried a cutlass but was otherwise unremarkable. Men used to mugging and intimidating, not a proper fight against a prepared opponent. Still, two against one, and it didn’t take a master swordsman to kill with an axe. “We don’t have to do this,” Jack said calmly, “Nothing I’m carrying is worth bleeding for.”

The shorter one took and half-step forward and sneered. “We don’t want yer purse, ye posh bastard. We wants ta gut ye. Ye killed me brother. Sunk his ship off Maddeegascar and left ‘im for th’ sharks!”

Jack looked to the taller thug. “And what about you, you like this man enough to bleed for his dead brother?”

The taller one made a low, phlegmy growl and the shorter one sneered again. "'e don't talk much these days, onnacount o' the fact that ye hanged him!"

"Not very well, it would seem. The only people I sink or hang are pirates and slavers, so your brother and your friend probably had it coming."

The larger one gave roar and lunged at Jack. Jack deflected the machete and slashed his poignard across the man's shoulder but was driven back by the shorter before he could press his advantage. At the edge of his vision he could see Beverly crossing swords with the third assailant. The shorter man came driving in with wild swings of his axe, too heavy to parry. Jack gave ground, then slid sideways. The other man stumbled, expecting resistance and that was all the opening Jack needed. He drove his sword under the man's arm, piercing heart and both lungs. Already a corpse, the man fell, twisting the sword from Jack's grasp.

The larger man came at Jack then, not with wild swings but controlled jabs and guarded pose. He looked a brute, but a brute with training, and Jack held only his knife. They circled, neither looking to make the first mistake. The fight was rapidly turning bad, he could feel it. Somewhere out of sight Beverly still fought the other man and would be no immediate help. The big man cut at Jack and when he dodged aside the man's left fist caught him in the cheek and knocked him down, head spinning. His knife bounced away across the lane.

Jack scrabbled backwards before the machete could come down and kicked out. His booted heel connected with the man's knee with a satisfying crack and the man let out a strangled bellow of pain. Jack came up swinging and bore the man to the ground. They rolled in the dirt, struggling, clawing at each other. The taller man couldn't use the machete with Jack's hands at his throat and Jack couldn't finish the job the noose started while fending off the machete.

The pulse in Jack's ears was the thunder of cannon and the blood in his nose smelt of gunpowder. The deck heaved under Jack. The swell was rising, grinding the two ships against each other. At the other end of the ship, Maynard was duelling with the pirate captain, except the pirate was holding his severed head by the beard in one hand and wielding his sword in the other and Maynard was in trouble, if Jack could just—

The taller man got one foot into Jack's belly and heaved him off. Jack blinked off stars and memories – *no not memories* – and felt the handle of the boarding axe under his hand. He lunged up and the axe came down once twice thrice and-

"You can stop now, Jack," Beverly said. She was leaving against the fence, looking mostly unmussed. Jack realized his arm was wet to the elbow and he dropped the axe onto the wet ruin that had been the taller man. Survived the noose and crossed all the seas just for this.

"There's a lesson in that, Jack. Sometimes you should just bear your costs and walk away."

"Some costs can't be borne." Jack planted one foot on the shorter corpse and heaved his sword out. "Some things must be fought."

"You can't fight what you can't see, Jack. Will Graham was right about one thing. Believing is seeing."

Jack's reply was pre-empted by the double click of a musket hammer being pulled. "Wot them 'ell's going on 'ere?"

Jack turned slowly, sword dangling from two fingers and held away. A Redcoat, fresh somewhere, given his sunburn. The muzzle of his musket looked a thousand feet deep, black and all-encompassing. "These two attacked me and I was simply defending myse-"

"Shut it! No fightin' in the King's streets, that's the law. It's the Tanty for you! Come on, move!"

Footsteps and another interjection. "Put that goon doown ye great thoompin' lobster." The sailor the voice oozed the kind of authority that gets sails set in a storm or soldiers through a breach and the redcoat responded by instinct, the musket barrel lowering a few inches. Jack eased to the side and the sailor placed one hand on the musket and gently pushed it down the rest of the way.

The redcoat spluttered, but he'd lost. The sailor clapped him on the shoulder. "Now I knows yer just doin' yer job, but this 'ere's an 'eero of t' sea! Captain Jack Crawford! 'E's the one 'oo sunk the *Shrike* and 'ung Maneater 'obbs from t' yard'rm. Now ye can clap 'im in irons and 'aul 'im up t' th' tanty, but my cap'n," he tapped the ribbon reading *Irascible* fluttering on his chest, "Would be like t' be askin' questions about why a friend o' th' crown was banged up just fer puttin' down a couple o' scurvy mutts like this. And it were two 'gainst one!"

The sailor's avuncular tone conjoined to the invocation of a post-captain overwhelmed the redcoat's sense of duty. Jack sealed the deal with a couple of guineas and a good word. The soldier actually touched his cap to Jack before he scurried off.

The sailor chuckled to see the redcoat go, and shook Jack's hand with enthusiasm. "Name's Hayworth. Me brother was on th' *Dartmouth Lass*, back in '18. 'E told me all about 'ow you rescued 'im after they was taken by the Dons. Said 'e never saw a pretty bit of action, and you fightin' th' Don captain on th' quarterdeck and all."

"That was a hard day. And it was my first mate who actually killed de le Corazon, in the end."

"Oh, right. 'Eard about 'er. She was a great 'and with sail and steel, I 'eard."

"The best," Jack said with a smile.

"Well, I be'er be hoppin' off," Hayworth said, "But it was grand t' be meetin' ye. And even if the gennlemen be turnin' their noses up t' ye, now there's not so many pirates found these wa'ers, ye'll always be welcome where there's honest sailors. Farewell, sir."

"Well, that was convenient," Beverly observed. She was cleaning her nails again, scraping dried blood out with her poignard. "Think you have a guardian angel?"

Jack laughed dryly and said, a touch too loudly, "Only if angels are about three feet tall, ginger and prone to interfering."

There was a long silence, and then a voice from above said, “Ohh, how’d you know it was me, Jack?” A head topped with short-cropped curly red hair appeared over the eaves of the nearest building.

“Because, Freddie, I know that wherever I go in Port Royal, I am never far from your eyes.”

“And a good thing, too, or that lobster would had you in irons!”

“I was handling that, Freddie.” Beverly paused in her ritual to give him a look and he sighed, dug out another guinea coin and flipped it to Freddie. “There’s for your trouble. Now go bother someone else.”

The coin disappeared into the urchin’s patchwork clothes like it had never been. “Awwww, come on, Jackie, how about you tell me where you’re sailing.”

“If I wanted everyone in port to know, I’d print it in the paper.”

“Not *everyone*... just them as will pay. Come on, Jackie, you’re visiting the asylum, taking on provisions for a long voyage, duelling pirates in alleys. I could eat off that for a month!”

Jack sighed. “Fine. I was visiting a former galley slave to learn about the Barbary Coast before I sail to the Med. Not enough pirates left in the Caribbean.”

Freddie cocked her head in thought. “That true? No, didn’t think so. That’s alright, people’ll buy it, which means I can sell it.”

“Find a new line of work, Freddie. Someday you’ll lie to the kind of people who won’t care that you’re a kid.”

“I’m not a kid,” Freddie said indignantly, “I’m eleven!” She paused, then said slyly, “If you’re that concerned, well, you could make me part of your crew.”

“Goodbye, Freddie.”

After the sound of small footsteps on rooftops retreated into the distance, Beverly said, “It doesn’t need to be a lie, you know. You could sail for the Barbary, make a difference there. Or out around the Horn. I’m sure the Company would pay for your services.”

“My work is here, Katz.”

“Your work is hunting pirates, Jack. There’s not left here. The navies of kings have swept the Caribbean clean. The wars are over and the treasure fleets don’t sail anymore.”

“There’s still one left.”

“Hannibal Lecter is not a pirate, Jack. He is a sea-devil, and you what going against him costs. I can’t pay that again. Can you?”

“He’s just a man, and men die.”

“Not that one, not while he keeps that pagan goddess bound to him.”

“Don’t give me that superstitious bullshit. You of all people-“

“Remember what Will Graham said. Believing is seeing.”

Fogs of Wind and Time

Chapter Summary

What happened aboard the Shrike?

Somewhere off The Gold Coast, March 1722

The fog filled the bay like a living thing. It clung to every rope and spar, rushing to fill the space they left behind. Sound was deadened, distorted. They all spoke in whispers and walked softly. Sailcloth was wrapped around the ship's bell and they carried out the rituals of timekeeping in mortuary quiet.

"You know," said Beverly, the first mate alone appearing unperturbed by their surroundings, "the Vikings believed that in a fog like this nothing could be trusted to be real." She was sitting in the lower crosstrees of the mainmast, only vaguely visible. Just a voice, reaching through the fog. The rest of the crew moved about or idled by the rail, ghostly.

"What we're hunting for today is real enough," Jack said from beside the wheel. He stood tall, hands behind his back, feet planted. A fixed point. The sails flapped limply, as though to remind that there was a breeze, even if there was so sensation of movement without reference point. "I think the Vikings would have been less afraid of what they couldn't see if they'd had something to steer by." He tapped the compass stand, half stroked it like a favourite pet.

"Or maybe the Vikings knew not to trust in just their eyes."

Lass stepped up next to Jack and said, "Believing is seeing, after all." She nodded once to Jack and walked forwards, dissolving into the fog. Jack frowned and remembered a fight off Madagascar two years before, remembered Lass falling overboard and remembered the frenzy of the sharks in the red-foamed water. He shrugged. Such is the way of dreams.

A runner came back from the bow, bare feet slapping dully on the deck. "Fifteen fathom, sand and shell, sir." Jack nodded and the sailor dashed back to his post.

"We're getting closer," Beverly said. "Are you sure you'll find what you're looking for?"

"The *Shrike* is here, I know it. He's burned two ships in the last two days, and this is the only unguarded source of fresh water for leagues. He's here."

"But is he what you're looking for?"

Jack had no reply. This is not the conversation he had had. The waters of his conscious rippled. Far below, something moved.

Then, cannonfire.

The booming, flattened and directionless in the fog, brought every head up. Jack broke the silence. “Lookout, there, where away?”

A pause, then, from the unseen tips of the masts, “Ten points to larboard! Half a mile.” The wheel turned and the ship leaned. Timbers groaned and spars creaked and the blood began the beat in Jack’s head like cannibal drums in the jungle.

“Clear for action,” he cried, his words triggering a frenzy of action. They had beat to quarters before entering the fog bank and now the sailors rushed to their positions. Cannons were crewed, swords and pikes stacked along the gunwhales, muskets lifted to the crosstrees.

“Who’s firing, do you think?” Beverly was standing at Jack’s shoulder now. Soon she would go forward to command the bow guns and, when it came time, the main boarding party.

“I don’t know. Probably some poor bastard happened into Hobbs’ nest. Damn this fog.”

Time passed. Jack stared at the sails like he could will them to fill. The cannonfire petered off and was replaced with the crackle of musket fire, clash of steel, screams of pain. Boarding. And then it ended, punctuated by a final thunderous boom.

They came out of the fog almost on top of the *Shrike*. It was much as Jack remembered. The shattered mast, the blood pouring from the scuppers, the port holes beaten into ruin. He knew that when they went aboard the horror they would find. People butchered for meat. Corpses piled up like cordwood. And in his cabin Garret Jacob Hobbs, impaled on dozens of swords, propped up and staring at an empty chest. The message was clear, he died how he lived and had nothing to take with him. What was not clear was the sturdy, blood-smeared and empty cage constructed in that cabin, but Jack knew he and all the others would dismiss it as Hobbs’s cruelty.

Jack also knew that the story would be changed and revised by sailors eager to forget the horrors they saw until they claimed Jack slew Hobbs in a ferocious boarding action.

“But none of this is what you’re looking for, is it?” Beverly asked. She raised one hand to point across the bay and the fog lifted at her gesture. Jack gasped. There, across the bay, unseeable save in a dream, was the *Chesapeake Ripper*. She sailed away, taking with her the explanation for that day, the explanation Jack had sought when all others were content with the story. He looked at that ship and saw as though he was close enough to reach out and touch her hated body. There, at the taffrail, stood Will Graham, looking back towards the *Shrike* like he could see through the fog. In his arms he held – cradled? treasured? – a something, something shadowed and indistinct but buzzing with significance. Jack reached for it, desperate to see. A darkness fell across him and he looked up. A figure, cloaked in the absence of light, rose above Will Graham and his burden like a father or a god. Antlers rose like masts above it. It turned the place that should have held its face and said, “Hello, Jack. I will see you again soon, when the horned moon dances and the seer counts the trees.” Then the *Ripper* was pulling away, shooting into the distance impossibly.

Jack woke up, more sweat-slick than the Caribbean heat demanded. He patted the cold, empty side of the bed once by ritual and stood. The ship rocked only enough to prove it lived even while shackled to the land. Jack splashed water on his face from the basin on his vanity. The vanity he had inherited.

When he looked up he saw Beverly sitting at his desk, feet up and cleaning her nails on the point of her knife. She was framed by the rising sun and just for a moment Jack saw great wings of flame and cloud unfurling behind her. Then she sat forward and was just Beverly again. “Dreaming, Jack?”

He nodded. “The *Shrike*, and what we really saw. Or maybe what we didn’t.”

“You mean that Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter were there.”

“Yes. I think so. I think something began there that day, something we missed.”

“We never learned how Will Graham joined the *Ripper*, nor why he left.”

“Something began that day, or maybe began to end.”

There was a knock on the door, and Jack felt the moment of clarity pass. The dream burned away. He opened the door to admit Jimmy Price, his quartermaster, and Brian Zeller, his bosun. Price brought paperwork, Zeller an attitude. Neither were how Jack wanted to start the day, but his steward, Brown, followed them in with fried ham and coffee. Jack ate, listened to and signed reports. By the time they were done the sun was climbing and the revelations of dreams were of no consequence.

Jack drained the last of the coffee as Price summed up, “...so we have water and supplies to last at least three months at sea, though I still think we should lay in more cordage while we have the chance, and-“

“What’s our next bearing, Captain?” Zeller interrupted.

Jack stared at him, just long enough to unsettle, to reinforce authority, then set down his cup and replied, “I don’t know yet. But I hope to have one today.”

“You mean from Will Graham.”

“Yes.” Zeller scoffed, and Jack said, clipping his words into a warning alarm. “Do you have a problem with that, Mister Zeller?”

“No, Captain, it’s just... We don’t the help of some unstable pirate gone sea-mad. We can catch Hannibal Lecter, just like every other pirate we’ve sunk and hanged.”

“Hannibal Lecter is not just any other pirate, Mister Zeller, if he was he’d have been caught and hanged long ago. But since neither we nor any navy of any nation has yet done that, I think we’ll take any opportunity we to catch this man. Is that understood?”

A thunderous silence, then, “Yes, understood, sir.”

“Good. Now, is there anything else to discuss?”

Price and Zeller exchanged the long, fraught look of people needing to broach an unpleasant topic. Price relented first and said, without making eye contact, “Sir, it’s about the position of first mate. Some of the crew feel that-“

“I thought I made myself clear on this subject.”

“I know, sir, but Beverly-“

“This discussion is closed, Mr. Price, and I don’t want to have it again.”

Price flinched from the thunder in Jack’s voice, and nodded weakly. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now go make my ship ready to sail on the evening tide.”

That perked them up, and Price said, “What if Will Graham doesn’t give you what you want to know?”

“Then we’ll do it the hard way, Mr. Zeller’s way.”

They filed out and Jack closed the door behind them with a sigh.

“Thanks, Jack,” Beverly said.

“Of course. You always have my back, and I’ve always got yours.”

“Sure you do, Jack,” she said distantly, “sure you do.”

The sun shone, the gulls called, the harbour stank of garbage and humanity. Another day in Port Royal. Jack was trailed by Zeller and Brown, both armed beyond reason and both determined not to let their captain have to fight two to one again. They passed through a town still stirring to life, or at least to hangover. The inns and taverns were already serving those looking for the hair of the dog. They climbed the hill to the asylum, leaving behind Port Royal’s stink for fresh trees and the hint of salt on the air.

The asylum stood amidst its manicured lawns, a squat heap of heavy stone that seemed to reject the brightness of the day. How long could a man live within its belly and remain the same man he was when he went in? They stopped at the door and slammed the heavy knocker against the aged, iron-studded wood. “You’ll need to wait outside the cell,” Jack warned his escort. “And if they want you to turn over your weapons, don’t argue. Chilton was less than graceful about giving Will Graham better quarters, and I’d rather not antagonize him further.”

The door creaked wide to admit them, but Jack could tell at once that something was amiss. The blood and screaming was a clue.

Blood was pooled at the top of the stairs leading down to the dark cells where Jack had first met Will Graham, and more was spattered nearby. Footsteps in the blood, like an instruction sheet to some crazed dervish, and two smeared hand prints on the wall where someone with wet hands had been dragged back down the stairs.

Jack moved towards stairs, brushing aside the orderly who had opened the door and now moved to stop Jack. The man had a freshly broken nose and bloodied knuckles. Brown and Zeller followed Jack, hands on sword hilts.

The screaming came from another orderly who had only had gore-slicked ruin where his ear had been. Two others, both with minor injuries, stood outside Will Graham's cell door, holding truncheons and grudges. Their glares made it clear Jack wouldn't be getting past them without a fight. He turned to Brown and Zeller and whispered, "Stay here. I have no idea what's going on, but we need Will Graham alive and able to talk, assuming he still is. Don't start anything you don't have to, but see that he stays that way."

"So now we're protecting pirates from servants of the crown, Jack?" Zeller wilted slightly under Jack's glare. "Uh, sir?"

"There's a thing called the greater good," Jack replied, "Look it up."

Brown had his eyes locked on Will Graham's cell door. "We got this, boss."

Jack skewered Zeller with a look, then went back up the several stairs to Chilton's well-aired office.

Chilton himself was holding a bloodied rag over his face and looking like the bear at the zoo that can't eat the children outside its cage. A bottle of rum stood partially drunk on his desk. "Oh, good, you're here," Chilton said, the rum audible in his voice under the scorn. "Come to see what your idiocy has wrought."

"Let me see that," Jack said, calmly and firmly. He prised Chilton's fingers off the rag and peeled it off the wound. "Hmm. Your eye is undamaged. In fact, either Will Graham is very bad with a knife, or he is very good."

"That is less comforting than you think." The news that he wasn't permanently maimed seemed to calm Chilton. Jack decided not to tell him he'd wear a scar across his face for life. "This is what comes of giving concessions to evil men. I don't care what you say, Will Graham is never getting that new cell with sunlight and fresh air."

Jack watched Chilton for a moment. The man's nerves were clearly still jangled. He fidgeted with the crusty for a moment, then tossed it aside and gulped down another glass of rum. He didn't offer any to Jack. Jack said, cutting into Chilton's internal narrative, "Where did he get the knife?"

Chilton gave a brittle laugh. "He took it off one of my orderlies. Bit his ear off and lifted the knife before we knew what was happening. He did this," Chilton gestured choppily to his face, "and then my men took him down."

“Gave him a beating, too, from the look of their knuckles.”

Chilton didn’t say anything, just shrugged and avoided eye contact.

“Will Graham has killed dozens of men in pitched battle, and you really think he was so easily subdued? You think he didn’t kill you because he couldn’t? Because a couple of lazy bullies who are used to hitting people that can’t hit back stepped in?”

“Well, what’s the alternative, then? Because he’s never getting what he asked for now. I’m thinking of bricking that door over. Let him eat his own ears if he’s hungry.”

Jack sighed and looked down at his hands. “No, he was ensuring I would say what I’m about to say.”

Chilton looked at Jack as sharply as he could through the thickening haze of rum. “And what’s that?”

“I need you to release Will Graham into my custody.”

He’d been beaten badly. Brown helped him up, helped him walk out the cell door. But even under the bruises and the blood, Jack could see in Will Graham’s smile that Jack had done exactly as he had expected.

Will Graham nodded to Beverly as he limped towards the stairs. “Hello, Lieutenant,” he said. “Good to see you. I hear we’re going to be shipmates again.”

What the Hawk Sees

Chapter Summary

> Port Royal to their rudder and the open sea ahead, but not everyone aboard ship looks at Will Graham the same way.

The Caribbean, May 1736

The salt spray and the warm wind. The creak of timbers and yards held together by rope and prayer. A ship at sea with a good crew and a stout captain. Will Graham filled his lungs with it like a drowning man breaching the surface for what he thinks might be the last time. Sucking in particles and memory to fill his blood before he sinks again, points of light to illuminate the abyssal deeps.

“You’re on my ship wearing chains again,” Beverly said. She was standing on the rail, one hand gripping a backstay, eyes closed and face tilted to the sun, bare feet planted wide and steady, knees rocking with the movement of ship and sea like she was part of it, a creature of foam and zephyr wind pressed into human form for just an instant. She had left her hat somewhere, and her long black hair streamed in the wind. A black flag, signalling a warning of no mercy.

“I think we’re both burdened with our irons,” Will replied, chains clinking as he gestured to the swords at her belt. “Jack Crawford holds us both down with metal bonds.”

Beverly didn’t open her eyes or look down at him. “The difference is, when I am freed from mine, the world will be softer.”

“No, the difference is that I *want* to escape mine. You’ve accepted yours.”

“We all become what we are meant to be in the end.”

“Are you so sure you have reached your end, Lieutenant?”

“You know the answer to that, Mr. Graham.” A cloud passed over the sun, and that shadow pressed a chill against Will Graham’s flesh. The sea took on the melancholy mien of a shore that will never again return a lost love. Then it passed and the sea sparkled in the sun. “And don’t call me that. That was a long time ago.”

Zeller stumped up. “Telling your sins to the sea, Graham?” he demanded, the bosun’s bark rougher with loathing. “You shouldn’t be up here alone. How about we shut you back in the forecastle.” Dark and cramped, a cell that pitched, rolled and stank.

“He’s not alone.” Matthew Brown, shirtless and Herculean in the sun and salt sweat, dropped down from the shrouds and placed one hand on Will Graham’s shoulder. The contact was like touching a weathervane before a thunderstorm. Crackling with potential. “I’m minding him for the captain.”

Zeller snorted. “Well I mind filth like this crowding my deck, *Mister* Brown.” The shorter Zeller was up in Brown’s face now, the long-practiced authority of a crack bosun swelling up and pushing out against the scraped and quivering musculature before him.

Will Graham watched with interest, looking for... there, the strain behind Brown’s eyes like a spar carrying too much sail in a gale. Would it hold, or would it carry away and throw a whole ship into peril? He placed one hand on Brown’s bicep, felt the tension there poorly masked by duty. The metal of his shackles held the cool of the ship’s hold and raised goosebumps along Brown’s skin. “It’s alright, Bosun,” Will said. “We’ll get out of the way. I’m sure you have... things to do.”

Zeller snorted and stumped away, managing to mix a sailor’s grace with a sergeant’s grounded presence. Will watched him go, then turned to find himself locking eyes with Brown. *Jack has a wolf here, and he thinks it is a sheepdog. I wonder if the dog knows it is wearing a costume...* Aloud, he said, not moving his hand from where it rested on Brown’s arm. “Tell me, Mr. Brown, do you always prefer to be the one above? Looking down, like a hawk choosing what flesh it will take next?”

Brown smiled slowly, and behind it Will saw the wolf’s fangs. “That is my preferred place, Mr. Graham. But I don’t mind sharing my places with someone else who can see what the hawk sees.”

Will held up his shackled hands. “I am sadly grounded right now, my wings are clipped.”

Brown slid one arm around Will’s shoulder and gripped a shroud with the other. “Don’t worry, Mr. Graham, I can help you ascend again.”

Jack, standing on the quarterdeck, feet braced and hands behind his back, watched Brown half-carry Graham to the lower crosstrees and felt a qualm. He turned his back and looked over the ship’s wake.

“Worried Will Graham is going to be a disruptive element?” Beverly asked. She was reclined on the stern rail, back against the running lantern, one booted foot dangling over the edge. Her hat was pulled low enough that Jack could barely see the glint of her eyes.

Jack leaned on the rail, looming over the ocean like a preacher from his pulpit. “Maybe. Brown and Zeller have been locking horns for months. Will Graham is just another bone in their kennel.” They watched Hispanolia slide by on the starboard. The jungle was shadowed and backlit by the setting sun. Sail northwest, Will Graham had said, northwest to find Hannibal Lecter. Jack was running lists of every cove and cave and pirate lair he knew, but it was a fruitless exercise that just chafed at his own dependence on a man he’s otherwise have cheerfully hung.

The sailor at the wheel kept her eyes studiously forward and ears closed. The captain's space on the quarterdeck was inviolable, four square feet for him to be alone and undisturbed. If he wanted to mutter to the sea, well, sailors knew never to trust a captain who held too closely to appearances.

A sail appeared around a promontory, providing a moment of interest from the crew. Fantasies of a rich prize, but idle fantasies. The wars were over for now, and almost every pirate had been chased from the Caribbean by the Royal Navy. Jack watched it through his scope, noting the boar's head prow and rich detailing.

"One of the Vergers' ships," Beverly said. "Wonder how badly Will Graham wants to run up the black flag and resume old habits."

Jack closed his scope and watched the merchant ship pass by. He fancied he could smell the livestock odour drifting on the wind. "Not much, I think. It was the Vergers who handed him into the tender mercies of Doctor Chilton. Maybe they're the ones who cost him the eye, too. Unless you know differently."

Beverly sighed. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Jack. I didn't make the connection myself under I saw him."

"So tell me about this connection."

She stared down at the wake. The sun was sinking fast and the ship's churned trail was beginning to fluoresce. "It was another lifetime. I was third lieutenant in the *Iron Kate*, that is, the *Catherine of Aragon*. We called our captain that, too. Hard woman. Maybe if she hadn't been so... Will Graham was just a seaman, young and freshly joined. He fell in with a couple of hard cases. One day we were watering on the Yucatan coast, we were cruising for Spanish treasure ships, and he was part of a group that decided to take some liberty in the jungle. They broke into one of the old temples and drank themselves into oblivion. When the marines dragged them back, Captain Prurnell was furious, beyond reason. She had them all clapped in irons and swore she would have them all court-martialled for desertion. I tried to plead their case, get her to agree to giving them all lashes, but she was adamant. When we took a prize a few days later, she transferred them over with the prize crew for transport back to Port Royal for trial."

"Did they rise up and take the ship?"

"No. At least, I never thought that, but the ship never reached Port Royal, or anywhere else. We assumed it ran into a hurricane or suffered some calamity. After the war ended I did some digging, but the Spanish hadn't retaken it, nor the French. It just... vanished."

"Or maybe that ship and its crew encountered the *Chesapeake Ripper*." Beverly shrugged and said nothing. Jack sighed and stroked the rail of his ship with a weary hand. "Goodnight, Beverly. Mr. Brown," he called in the bedrock tones of command, "please secure the prisoner in the forecastle and resume your duties." He went below, and the quarterdeck was empty again, save for a sailor steering a ship.

Night fell with the languid warmth of the Caribbean. The breeze from the shore brought the smells of the jungle. It was a good ship with a tight crew under easy sail and a clear course. The waxing moon showed its face candidly.

The night watch idled at the windward rail, telling stores of seas seen and lands left behind. Below decks played a symphony of snores and creaks and running water. Jack Crawford slept deeply, utterly still yet intimately aware of his ship. In their cabin, Price and Zeller shared companionable, comfortable silence, communicating without words. In the forecastle, Will Graham waited.

The moon rose and the sea turned. The bell marked time, a soft artificial ripple smoothed away by the eternal stillness of the night. A figure moved, slipping past sleepers and guards with feline purpose. The lock to the forecastle cabin was well-oiled and fresh, sliding open with the ease of innocence.

Matthew Brown slid into Will Graham's cabin. They didn't speak. They didn't need to. They taught each other with soft sounds and guiding hands, and they moved together in symphony with the ship, their motions reflecting and amplifying the sea itself. Afterwards they lay quietly, salt skins pressed together. Brown's fingers traced out the map of Will Graham's life, circumnavigating the knotted, serpentine scar across his belly, traversing the stripes and crosshatching across his back, finding the ridges and depressions of bullet wounds and sword cuts.

"This is a good ship," Will said softly. "Well captained, well crewed. Aged, but sound. He paused, arched as Brown found a particular and thankfully unscarred spot on his hip. "Do you know the meaning of this ship's name? The *Quo Bella*."

Brown paused. "It's Dago speak, isn't it? Means 'to war'?"

Will chuckled without menace but rich with irony. "Nearly. It's Latin, the language of Rome, of Empire. It means 'whither war', or perhaps it is a statement, 'to war'. Does Jack Crawford seem like a man who sails to war?"

Brown paused to think, resting his chin on Will's shoulder. His stubble was a sharp counterpoint to the smoothness of his touch. A taste of sour to prove the savoury of the dish. "No," Brown said after a moment. "He's looking for a place without war. Even if he has to make that place himself. Even if in the making he ensures he cannot live there.'

"You see the contradiction most don't."

"The hawk sees from above, where patterns are clear."

"Well, then what you should see is that like everything the Romans did, 'bella' has two meanings. War, and beauty. Jack Crawford is looking for beauty, looking for where it went."

"So what is Jack Crawford's beauty?"

"Not what. Who." Will Graham laughed low and tangled his hands in Matthew Brown's hair. Brown brushed his lips across the craggy landscape of Will's ruined eye socket and thought

of hawks, wheeling in the clouds.

The Pagan Storm

Chapter Summary

Storm and cannonfire can bring down the mighty and raise up the low.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Off Jamaica, May 1736

The *Quo Bella* ran over the sea beneath an arching vault of void and stars. A straight course and steady breeze. A perfect night. She was a double-masted corvette with a distinctly oversized mainmast. She was no titan of the sea nor racing schooner, but in her every line and rope, in every lick of paint and well-scrubbed plank she spoke of the love invested in her. A hyena queen, snarling at the lions.

Jack Crawford slept as deeply as the sea, his awareness spreading out through his ship. His breath was the gentle pitching of her deck and his dreams were the wind singing in her ropes and stays. He awoke. Something was wrong.

He padded up on deck, bare feet and trousers only. The sailor at the helm knuckled a salute but didn't speak. She could feel captain's mood as clearly as the currents tugging at the rudder. Jack paced the quarterdeck a moment, settling the ship's position on his mental map. Ahead should be the Islas Eucaristía, a cluster of thirteen rocks and islets projecting out from the shore. Most ships sailed around, but smaller ones like the *Quo Bella* could shave an hour or more by passing between them. It was a risk for small gain, though, and the Islas had once been a popular place for buccaneers and Maroons to ambush passing ships. The Islas were not what had woken him, he decided. He went forward and scrambled up the ratlines to the upper crosstrees. There the wind was sharper and the pitching more pronounced. The mast leaned out over the sea towards the land.

The horizon was a suggestion in the night, sea and sky blending together. But there, something darker against the night. Jack trained his scope, reaching out across the distance willing there to be...

Sails. *Black* sails.

Jack slammed his scope shut and called down, "On deck there, fetch Mr Zeller and tell him to rouse the watch, and do it quietly. And someone find Mr. Brown, I want Will Graham up here."

"We're here, Jack." Will, wrists and ankles chained, emerged from the forecastle led by Brown. "Is it her, Jack? Is it the *Ripper*?"

“I think so. I think so.”

Activity. Zeller roused the crew, stirring men and women from their sleep with a bosun’s practiced fury. The decks were cleared, the hammocks bundled along the rails and the guns prepared. Activity gave way stillness.

Will Graham and Matthew Brown were islands in this, standing still at the forecastle. The *Ripper*, if indeed it was her, was little more than an occasional occluding of some low star, but Will Graham frowned across the waves like she was illuminated by brightest day. He tilted his head to the side as though listening to some insistent whisper, and Brown saw his lips move softly. Then Will’s head snapped up. “It’s a trap,” he said, so low Brown could barely hear him. The sailors crouching over the two chasers, long sixes of polished brass, didn’t appear to hear anything. “He’s luring us in,” Will said, still so low.

In the waist, Zeller stood by the rail among the gun crews and grinned. “We’re catching up.”

Aloft, Jack watched the *Ripper* bear to port, sliding around the Islas with grace. He slid down a backstay like a skylarking midshipman and took the steps to the quarterdeck three at a time. The *Ripper* was almost broadside-on, now, running under easy sail and to all appearances unaware of the *Quo Bella.* Still, even the darkness couldn’t disguise her lethal lines and Jack’s imagination filled in the double rows of cannon ports along her side. He trained his scope on her again. No activity on her deck, no glow of fuses nor sailors in her rigging.

“You can take her, Jack,” Beverly whispered in his ear.

He moved his scope to her quarterdeck, and there paced a solitary figure. Her captain? He stared, and the figure began to grow larger, expanding to fill Jack’s gaze, an awful mass he couldn’t look away from. And there, were those antlers, thrusting up all twisted and unnatural from the figure? No. No, it couldn’t be. Jack wrenched the scope from his eye and felt the sudden swear standing on his brow despite the cool night wind on his shirtless torso. He glanced down across the deck and saw Will Graham staring back with Beverly at his shoulder. They both nodded slowly to Jack.

He sucked in a breath. “Mr. Zeller. When the *Ripper* has rounded the Islas, I want hands to make sail, but quietly. We’re going to take the inside passage. We’ll come out right on her tail and rake her stem to stern.” The *Quo Bella’s* guns were thirty-two pounder carronades, genuine smashers once they were in range, and they allowed her to punch far above her weight. He would appear out of the night, beat the *Ripper* into kindling and then board and carry whatever still floated. Hannibal Lecter wouldn’t see another sunrise. “Mr. Price. You may send the crew to get their breakfast in shifts, but no rum. Am I clear? Good. Mr. Zeller, you have the quarterdeck. I am going to get dressed.”

On the forecastle, Will Graham looked up at the cloudless sky and said, “Smells like rain.”

The time crept by. The ship ran the passage through the Islas Eucaristía without incident. Jack let Zeller take command. He would never be the navigator and ship handler Beverly was, but he was improving. The sailors waited with the sanguine patience of men and women tested in

battle, not anxious to begin but no sign they'd shirk when the cold wind blew. Most were in waist, grouped around their guns while others hung in the rigging, equally ready to make and reef sail as to rain musket shot and grenades on the enemy deck. The *Ripper* had a higher board than the *Quo Bella*, so their fire would be crucial when it came time to storm the ship.

The moon was sinking into the horizon, presaging the dawn, when the *Quo Bella* rounded the last point to find... nothing. An empty sea. Whispers spread up and down the deck, and Jack frantically scanned the horizon. Had he miscalculated the time? Had the other ship stood out to sea for some other harbour? And then...

"Behind us!" came the cry from the lookout. "She's behind us!"

There, sliding out of the night from the cove she'd been lurking in, was the *Chesapeake Ripper.* Jack reeled, stunned. It wasn't possible. The *Quo Bella* had made the passage in excellent time. For the *Ripper* to have made the longer trip in enough time to position for an ambush... it wasn't *possible*.

"She's firing," someone cried, and four puffs of fire spurted from the *Ripper's* prow. The range was long, and all but one fell short. The last impacted on the hull with a flat thud without enough force left to penetrate the timbers. But as their guns heated up the *Ripper's* range and accuracy would only improve.

Jack shook himself into action. "Mr. Zeller, starboard watch to make sail!" The *Ripper* had caught them flat-footed, still under easy sail for maneuvering. He stated at the other ship, up at his own sail and realized they wouldn't be able to pull away in time. "Mr. Price! Larboard watch! Stand by your guns! When the range closes, we'll yaw to port and give 'em a broadside or two in the teeth!" The crew cheered lustily, though they were as aware as Jack that it was a desperate move. The *Ripper* had more guns and longer, and if they couldn't build up speed the *Ripper* would be able to dictate the engagement, and that meant death. But if they could get in a heavy broadside or two, knock away some spars or gods willing a mast...

Will Graham watched the *Ripper* and Matthew Brown watched him. Will gripped the rail so hard his knuckles were white, and his shoulders were hunched, coiled up like he was about to leap across the sea to the other ship. Whether to fight the other crew or join them, Brown had no idea. Either way, he wanted to see Will Graham soar.

Clouds began to scud across the sky, and a crosswind began to stir and chop the water.

The *Ripper's* chaser guns began to fire more regularly. The next salvo raised two bright plumes from the water, bracketing the *Quo Bella*. The third ball passed over the quarterdeck, so close the wind of its passing tugged the hat from Jack's head. The fourth punched a neat hole in the spanker.

The *Quo Bella's* sails began to bellow out, the extra sail pulling the ship ahead. Jack felt her heel over a touch more, the timbers beneath his feet thrumming. There was a ripple at the edge of the sails he didn't like, a forewarning of a change in the wind. It was months from storm season, and yet...

The *Ripper* fired again. The well-drilled precision of their fire depressed Jack. These were no savage, untrained corsairs. Two balls smacked the hull above the waterline, but didn't penetrate. One crashed through the windows of his cabin at an angle, spraying the gun crews there with splinters and shards of glass. The last severed a cable, bringing a tangle of rope and blocks down on the deck. Zeller was on it immediately, shouting orders to cut the mess away and splice the damage.

The *Ripper* was surging ahead on the same winds pushing the *Quo Bella*. Now it came down to Jack's judgement. The longer he waited before putting the helm over, the closer the enemy came and the more their broadside would tell. But that also meant taking more fire, and if some crucial spar or even the rudder should be damaged they would be helpless, unable to maneuver. The *Ripper* could just lie off and batter them to pieces at leisure. "Mr. Zeller," he called, "Spill some wind from the mainsail. Like that last one lamed us." Zeller just nodded and gave his own orders. The mainsail deflated, just for a moment, but long enough to let the *Ripper* surge ahead another cable's length. Soon, now, Jack decided.

More gouts of flame from the enemy ship. They were like eyes, glowing red and briefly seen in the night. The eyes of a hunting beast. More holes in the sails, and one that finally exacted a cost. A ball entered the lower deck and struck one of the guns in Jack's cabin. It passed through a sailor, killing her instantly and spraying her across the deck. Another was crushed, screaming, as the gun came loose. Price took charge, a very different man in battle than his normally inoffensive mien suggested. "Secure that gun! Get the wounded down to the surgeon!" He helped the surviving gun crew, one of them bleeding where he'd been struck by bone splinters, lash down the gun.

Jack let the sounds be background, like the sound of surf when you sleep ashore, and judged the moment carefully. Just before he reckoned the *Ripper* would fire again, he cried, "Hard to larboard," and the sailor at the helm was doing it before Jack had finished speaking. The *Quo Bella* turned hard, pitching toward the sea. Above Jack, in the rigging, something cracked ominously. "Stand by your guns," he shouted down to the deck, "fire as they bear. We need to put every ball into her teeth and-"

"She's turning!" came the cry from above.

Jack whirled around and swore. The *Ripper* was turning to match them as precisely as fleet maneuvers. He wouldn't get to rake her brow, and they would have to suffer matching broadsides. The *Quo Bella* began to fire, guns going off in rippling sequence. Most fell short, but enough told to raise a nervous cheer from the crew.

Then the *Ripper* fired, all at once, and it was like the world ended. The whole side of the enemy ship vanished behind a cloud of powder smoke bare instants before several hundred pounds of steel crashed into them like the fist of god. Eighteen pound balls smashed through railings and hull, sending out foot-long splinters to gash and impale. At least two more guns were unseated, and at least a half dozen sailors were down, some moving and some not. In the blink of an eye, what had been an orderly deck became a charnel scene. And it would only get worse. But the crew kept working. Zeller, Price and the gun-captains ordered, pushed and bullied sailors into place, helping the wounded, pushing the dead aside, redistributing crew from the damaged guns.

The two ships were sailing in parallel now, each in its own cloud of gunsmoke. The *Quo Bella* fired again, this time in single broadside that made the whole ship rock, and then the *Ripper* fired back, repeating the devastation. The *Ripper* was just a tangle of masts and rigging poking out of a cloudbank lit from within by gunfire. Broadside for broadside they went, each ship hammering at a foe they couldn't see. The *Quo Bella* was hurting, gunports beat into gaping holes, blood leaking from the scuppers, almost half the port guns damaged or dismounted. Even though each of the *Quo Bella's* guns was heavier, the *Ripper* had nearly twice as many and more accurate. Worse, the *Ripper's* fire was angling high.

"They're trying to dismast you, Jack," Beverly said, "cripple you and eat you when you're bleeding."

Then a cry from the lookout, high above. "She's pulling ahead!"

What? How? The *Ripper* was indeed beginning to surge forward, though Jack could see no extra sail being made, nor a breeze that hadn't reached the *Quo Bella* yet. He didn't know how, but he did know what it meant. If he held his course, the *Ripper* would pass in front and rake his bow. If he turned with them, he trapped himself between the enemy and the shore with no room to maneuver. He could try bearing out to sea and cut across the *Ripper's* wake, but that would risk the *Quo Bella* falling off the wind and, once again, lying helpless before the enemy. Jack felt the devil's jaws closing around him. As he cast about for some solution or inspiration, he happened to catch Will Graham's eye, two still figures at either end of a shattering chaos. Will raised one shackled hand and pointed back past Jack's shoulder.

A storm, a massive wall of dark and roiling cloud rising up in the east. Unseasonable and inexplicable, but undeniable. A storm made for breaking ships, but perhaps in this case for saving one. "Hard to larboard," he roared. "Get us out to sea!"

"Sir?" the sailor at the helm looked quizzical, and Jack couldn't blame her. That would expose them to the *Ripper's* guns at angle that minimized their own ability to return fire. At least it would be to the undamaged port side. The sailor saw the resolve in Jack's face and put the helm over.

Zeller ran up as the ship pitched over, a question on his lips but was interrupted by another of the *Ripper's* broadsides. Sailors died. A ball struck the mizzentop with a crack audible over the thunder of guns and roar of the sea. The mast splintered and pitched over, held up only by the confusion of rigging around it. Zeller started to make for the ratlines but Jack stopped him. "No, I'll deal with that. You keep the guns firing as long as you can, and make all prepared for that storm."

The storm came upon them fast. The sea began to heave and the rain came on in great far drops. The *Ripper* cut across their bow, but the motion of the sea mitigated the accuracy of their fire and the worst casualty was the mermaid figurehead who was sadly beheaded. Then they were out to sea, and the *Ripper* vanishing into the darkness.

Will Graham struggled across the pitching deck toward the quarterdeck. Sailors scrambled around him, securing guns and battening hatches. Spray and rain slashed down, sluicing the blood from the planks. Brown followed close behind, catching him when the roll and wet conspired with the shackles to drag him down.

The land was out of sight. The *Quo Bella* was alone is a rippling, angry darkness bounded by wave and cloud, backlit by staccato flares of red lightning. Sails were reeled in until only the barest scraps showed to push the ship before the storm.

A bolt of lightning speared down and struck the damaged mizzenmast in an explosion of splinters and shards. Wreckage crashed down onto the port railing, dragging the ship out of the wind. Tangled in that wreckage was Jack Crawford.

“Cut him loose,” Zeller screamed over the wind, “get the captain loose!”

Sailors fell the tangle with a will, hacking with axes and knives. Jack Crawford was dragged from the wreckage, terribly still. Price knelt over him as everyone looked on, the storm forgotten. “He’s alive! He’s alive!” And indeed Will could see some suggestion of breath in Jack’s chest as Price and another sailor lifted his limp form below decks to the surgeon’s undercroft.

“So who’s going to command now,” Beverly asked will, her voice undiminished by the sea’s fury.

“Zeller!” Will shouted, pointing,” “We’re going to broach!” And indeed the ship was lurching dangerously, dragged down by the trailing wreck of the mizzentop. If the ship turned fully perpendicular to the storm, the waves would push them over like a child’s toy and they’d all wake up in hell amongst the drowned.

Zeller swore and shoved and ordered and hatchets made a mess of the decking as they chopped at cables stiffened with tar and time. The wreckage sprang away and the ship righted, the now team of sailors at the helm dragged the wheel back over.

Price returned to the deck, and the remaining officers congregated on the quarterdeck for a shouted conference. “The captain’s alive,” Price said, “but he took a sharp blow to the head and the surgeon doesn’t think he’ll be coming round soon.”

“So what do we do now,” Brown asked, and Will could see the fear in Zeller’s eyes. “Who can sail us through this?”

“I can,” Will said, forcing himself into the huddle. “I’ve beaten storms like this before.”

“Never,” Zeller spat back, “You belong in a cell, not the deck of a ship.”

“Do you *want* to die? You know anyone else who can handle this?”

Zeller glared. “Beverly could have-“

“Well, Beverly isn’t here, is she?”

Zeller lunged at Will, and Brown held him back. “And whose fault is that, you bastard?”

Price intervened. “It doesn’t matter now. Unchain him.” He ignored Zeller’s surprised, poisonous glare. “Unchain him, now!”

Brown hastened to comply, and when Will shook loose of the weight it was like a different man stepped into his skin. “Mr. Price, get everyone without a rope to pull below and make all secure. Mr. Zeller, take three men above and shake two reefs out of the mainsail.” There was a frozen moment. “Go! Now!” They went, and Will shouted orders. “Set course west by south-west.” He looked over at Brown and grinned. “This is a storm to ride, not to fight. We run with her, and we make her our ally.”

Price and Zeller exchanged a look and a hasty kiss before they separated. “You know why he can sail this storm, right? Because it isn’t natural. It’s an evil thing, called up wherever the *Ripper* goes by Lecter’s pagan goddess. Will Graham is leading us where Hannibal Lecter wants us to be.”

Chapter End Notes

I realized as I was writing this chapter that I've been rearranging the geography of the Caribbean. Oops. So that's why the Quo Bella just teleported from the coast of Haiti to Jamaica.

Also, I just want to say thank you very much to everyone who's been leaving comments and kudos. It's super encouraging, and I love seeing the questions especially. :D

If you're on Tumblr, you can find my writing blog at malcolmwritesinspace.tumblr.com. I'm happy to answer asks or whatever, and if people are interested I could post progress updates for future chapters.

Thanks again for reading!

Dry Bones in a Frozen Sea

Somewhere off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, October 1718

Another dream. Another remembered hunt through fog and peril. Jack felt the ship rock under his feet and the sharp bite of the North Atlantic air on his face. Ice littered the water.

Jack turned and looked at Beverly. In this time, she still dressed and held herself like her departure from the Navy was a temporary thing. Her hair was neatly tied back in a queue, her collar sharply pressed, her eyes bright with the hunger of the chase. As he looked at her, he felt a curious sense of dislocation until he realized he was standing outside himself looking at a younger, sharper version of himself.

Beverly, too, was separated from her earlier incarnation, worn down by wind and tide and wounds, all pretence to naval standards gone. Her hair blew free in the breeze, and just for a moment Jack thought he saw it spreading out like raven's wings. Then it was gone, and he stood beside his friend in a dream of themselves.

"I remember this," Jack said. "This is the day that we stopped de la Corazon."

"Yes. The day that made you famous."

Jack shook his head. "And for something that should never have happened. De la Corazon was just a soldier who wouldn't stop fighting a war that had already ended."

"Is that all you think she was?"

Jack snorted. "You mean how she was supposedly a witch, imbued with all the rage and pagan magicks of the Taino? No, that's just the story men tell themselves whenever they fear a woman."

"True. But that doesn't mean there are no witches."

"I didn't see her powers save her on this day."

"You underestimate her purpose."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

Beverly just pointed ahead, where past the bow two ships were appearing through the fog, hulls locked together.

"There they are," Jack said, "And she's taken a prize!" He realized he was back in his younger self, but curiously disconnected, like he was a puppet on the strings of dream-logic.

"All hands to stations," Beverly yelled, sending sailors scrambling to guns and up lines. She turned to Jack, "Orders, sir?"

Jack felt all the warmth of friendship leach away, leaving the iron of command and the heat of battle-joy. “Ms. Katz, take command of the forward battery. We’ll lay alongside the enemy and give them a broadside of grape and musketfire, then we’ll board in the smoke. If we can free the crew of that merchantman we will, but our first priority has to be stopping de la Corazon. Her terror ends today!”

The crew cheered, and Jack shook hands with his first mate before she bounded down the deck.

The action passed in the blur of dream time. They caught the Spanish crew still engaged in looting their prize and fell upon them like wolves. The Spanish were veterans all and fiercely loyal to their captain, but Jack had assembled a crew of the hardest-bitten men and women cast up on the beach when the navy paid off at the end of the war, sailors who would otherwise have likely shipped for the Caribbean to join the rising scourge of piracy there.

By the time Jack fought his way to the quarterdeck, de la Corazon stood in a circle of bodies, red to the elbows. She’d been wounded in the leg and shoulder, so her reputation for invincibility was clearly untrue but it was easy to see where it had come from. She was tall and sea-hardened, with a fighter’s sinewy muscle.

They crossed swords, harshly at first, hacking at each other, until each recognized the other’s skill and began to rely on technical skill. They lunged, parried, circled, each moving with the roll of the ship. As the lethal dance went on, Jack felt the lassitude of disassociation again until he was standing aside, watching his younger self trade blows with the corsair. He heard again the bitten-off, panted conversation he’d had with de la Corazon as they tried to murder each other. He’d begged her to surrender, to save the lives of her sailors who might be jailed or even paroled.

“The war is over, Doña,” he’d said. “The treaties have been signed.”

She’d spat at his feet. “You think this is about the ego of men? That I damned my soul so some French bastard can rule the world?”

She cut at him, a low feint he’d believed followed by a slashing back cut he’d barely escaped. “Why, then? You cut a swath from Klaipėda to here, and for what? Baltic amber and Danish gold?” They hammered at each other. It had been at that point, Jack remembered, that he’d realized that even wounded she was more than a match for him, remembered the desperation.

“Just let me go,” she’d said as their swords had locked and they’d struggled for leverage in the blood-slick deck. “Let me go and I’ll sail north into the ice and you’ll never hear from us again.” There had been desperation in her voice, and Jack realized that she’d been sincere. It hadn’t just been the wheedling of a cornered criminal.

“I can’t do that,” Jack had responded through gritted teeth. “Not after what you did in Llareggub.”

She’d laughed bitterly, and with a heave of her shoulders shoved Jack off his feet. “After all this, you want to hang me for kicking over some Welsh shitpile. I thought you English sang songs of doing that.” She’d kicked Jack in the face with stunning force.

At the time, he'd been too dazed to fully grasp what had happened next. For once, sailors' tales did not exaggerate too far. Beverly had been halfway across the ship when she saw Jack fall and she crossed it in the time it took for de la Corazon to draw her sword back. Beverly came up the ladder at a flat run and slammed into the Spanish captain, sending them sprawling and grappling. They'd thrashed and clawed at each other while Jack had tried to regain himself. He'd just puked on the deck for his efforts.

When the end came for de la Corazon, it came quickly. She and Beverly regained their feet and their swords and came together in a blur of steel. Where Jack had fought with mere proficiency, Beverly used artistry. Swordplay was the skill that made her career in the Royal Navy, and ended it. Here it ended de la Corazon. Even with the omniscience of a deamer, Jack couldn't follow the sequence of moves that ended with de la Corazon's sword spinning away into the sea and Beverly's sword piercing her heart.

De la Corazon collapsed into Beverly's arms, and this time Jack saw that she'd whispered into Beverly's ear, something low and insistent, before Beverly dropped her corpse like a sack of snakes.

Dream-Jack looked at dream-Beverly. "What did she say to you?"

"Nothing I was able to understand until it was too late. Nothing that matters yet. What does matter, what matters right now, is down below." They were standing in the hold of the Spanish ship. Outside, Jack could hear his crew, engorged with victory, hammering on the thick oak door. Beverly pointed to a chest. "In there."

Jack hauled the chest open. Inside was a pile of lucre, shiny and stolen, like in the stories. Atop was a plain leather-bound box and inside that box was a child's skull. The bone was shiny and brown with age. The skull had been smashed in life, the crown caved in by some great blow, and after death someone had wired it back together with silver and gold. At the time, it had just been another piece of weird loot from the lands east of the Baltic. Now it seemed to glow in Jack's hands.

"What is this," Jack asked, turning the skull in his hands. He very carefully did not thin about how small it was, about the violence that converted it from a person beloved into this macabre trophy.

"Too bad you didn't ask that at the time. I could tell you the history of it, Jack, tell you all about how in 1301 a party of Teutons crossed the river Neman and sacked the house of a Lithuanian noble. How they burned and looted and murdered in the name of their god and about how they were all found dead, carved apart and eaten as though by bears. Or demons."

"Sounds like a ghost story to me."

"Look at what you're holding in your hand, Jack, and think about what you just said."

Jack frowned down at the skull. It grinned back, hiding its secrets behind empty sockets. "So it's some old pagan fetish."

"Jack, you need to *see."* And up they whirled, higher and higher until Jack could see the curve of the earth below. And there, far away yet perfectly clear, was a ship, sailing out of the viking seas under full press.

Jack gasped. "The *Ripper."* And he could see, as clearly as a line drawn on a map, that that ship was sailing for them, for the skull. "So this is what de la Corazon was doing? She was taking the skull to hide in the wastes? Beverly? Beverly where did you--"

Jack woke up. It took him a moment before he could determine why the world felt wrong. No motion beneath him. Dry land and a canvas roof. He turned his head and looked out of the tent flap. A stretch of beach and a strait of chopped water between him and some other land. He heard shouting, voices harsh with anger, piling and overlapping in cacophony. And then a gunshot.

The Island of Swallows

Chapter Summary

> The storm is coming, and Will Graham might be the only one who save the ship, even if the storm has a mind of its own. Jack comes to a decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At Sea, May 1736

The storm howled down up them like the rage of every discarded storm god, and Will Graham laughed in its face.

They had lost all track of time in the unchanging gloom, and corkscrew motion of the ship as it fought cross seas and thrashing winds had reduced most of the crew to shivering, puking misery and left only the hardiest souls to man the ship. Price had recovered from his seasickness and tended to the others as best he could, aided by one of the surgeon's mates. There had been four deaths thus far. Two sailors thrown from the rigging and lost to sea. Another had simply puked himself to death, exhaustion and dehydration stopping his heart. The last was a Finnish sailor who's begun screaming in his own language and wouldn't be comforted. When Price had turned his back, the man had dashed his head against a stanchion so hard his skull caved in. They slid the bodies over the gunwale and went back to their misery.

Zeller and Brown were among the crew still able to function, and in the unending horror and storm they'd found a kind of equilibrium to their relationship as self-preservation overrode enmity. Mostly they were too sick and too tired and too awed by Will Graham to fight.

Will had lashed himself to wheel on the first day and hadn't left to sleep since. He wrestled the storm and laughed and sang as he did. It was a storm like no other, a breaker of ships, and Will Graham mastered it. When the waterspouts towered up and everyone screamed for him to turn and run he sailed them through, weaving between the fingers of Thor and Poseidon like he could see their courses extending into the future.

Once, when the winds seemed straighter and the rain less blinding, Brown crept up onto the quarterdeck, clutching the lifelines, and stood next to Will.

"This is a good ship, Matthew, a fine ship! Jack was right to name her for beauty. Here, place your hand on the wheel!" Will gripped Matthew's hand and together they felt the living motion of the *Quo Bella.* "Does she not take wing like a living thing," he half-sang. "Put your head back, Matthew, close your eyes and let the storm wash over you!"

Matthew did, and he felt himself expanding up and out, tethered by the warmth of Will's hand and heartbeat, yet lifted and enlightened. He felt the storm, felt the life in it. He saw how the *Quo Bella* was a partner to it, not an opponent. And there, behind the winds and lightning, he felt an intelligence, something deep and shadowed, yet tinged with guilt and a roiling sadness. He could almost... a face, perhaps, golden and ageless, turning towards him. His soul recoiled and yearned all at once for he knew that to look into those alien eyes would consume him, melt him away in love and wonder. Just... a bit closer...

"Land! Land ho!"

Zeller's voice cut through the vision, dumping Matthew back into his body. He felt tears mixing with the rain on his face as he mourned an oblivion more wondrous and terrible than he could have imagined.

"Land, dead ahead!" Zeller shouted again as he struggled up to the quarterdeck. And, indeed, revealed by the flash of lightning was a low darkness distinguishable from the sea only by its solidity.

"I know!" Will shouted back. "Mr. Zeller, to below and rouse what crew you can. We'll need more hands to sheets and braces if we're to survive what comes next." Zeller stared at Will for a moment, then closed his mouth and went. Will turned back to Matthew. "We're right where she wants us to be."

Matthew worked his jaw, trying to unstick his throat. "Who is she? She's..." He didn't have the words. Did anyone? Could anyone?

Will laughed. "So you saw her. She is Lecter's pagan goddess. A spirit he captured and bound into human form and shackled to his will. He made her send this storm to test us and drive us away. To see if Jack is worthy of being hunted."

"Even with you aboard? Though you might have died? I thought you were..."

"We were, and yes, I might have died. But then Hannibal would know I wasn't worthy."

"Do you want to be?"

Will didn't answer for a long time. "Hannibal thinks the goddess is subservient to him, but he doesn't have the control he thinks he does. She led us to this place, she guided me through the storm so we could catch him."

"How do you know this?"

"Because I helped bind her."

"Then why would she watch over you?"

"Because I promised to come back and free her. And because she's just like him, in many ways. She wants to see what happens." He nodded to the gathering crew dragging themselves up from belowdecks. "Time to go to work, Matthew. If we live, I have wonders to show you."

For the first time, they fought the storm. The approaching land proved to be an island standing off from some mainland, and they put the ship over to run up the channel between them. Four more sailors died or were lost to the sea and a dozen injured, but the ship survived and they anchored off a beach where the low island shielded them even a little. Matthew swore he felt the storm behind to ease the moment the anchors bit into the seabed.

When the storm broke and scattered west in fitful chunks, the Caribbean sun shone down on them and on a golden beach and a mangrove jungle. They lowered what boats hadn't been smashed or carried away by the storm and went ashore with the ecstasy of pilgrims. Fresh water and fruit and a wild boar slaughtered the sea lent the scene a festive air as the crew found unity in the joy of survival.

When Jack awoke they were on the verge of killing each other.

He limped out of the tent, weak and dizzy, to see his crew divided. Graham and Zeller were facing off and Jack could see the crew choosing sides. Most sat or stood on the sidelines but a solid knot stood behind Zeller and strangely, worrisomely, Will Graham had his own band of supporters beyond just Matthew Brown. Price stood between the two groups like the referee at a prize fight, a smoking pistol held in the air.

"That is **enough**," he roared in a creditable bellow, despite his aching head. "Whatever is happening here ends now. Mr. Zeller, I see boats that could use caulking. Mr. Brown, perhaps you and Mr. Graham could take a walk, that way. The rest of you, do something useful. Mr. Price, a word." The anger in the air fizzled away into embarrassment and the sailors scattered to do or find tasks. Most of the ones who'd picked sides went back to mixing freely, but Zeller and Graham had the mien of dogs dragged away from a cat, hackles up and posture rigid.

Jack hobbled back to his tent and sat heavily. When the world stopped spinning, Price was there, leaning over him with pinched concern. The other man ducked back out of the tent and yelled for food and water to be brought for the captain, then came and sat with Jack. "How much do you remember, sir?"

Jack rubbed the sore, swelling bruise across his temple. "A storm. I was up the mast and there was a flash... and the *Ripper*! What happened?"

"Escaped into the storm. Or maybe I should say we escaped. You fell from the mizzen, landed on your head. Our noble surgeon decided to dose you with laudanum for fear you'd reinjure yourself, though he didn't mention that to us at the time."

Jack grunted. That would explain the sickliness. "And where are we now? This doesn't look like Jamaica. Or even Cuba."

"It's not. We're on an island Will Graham referred to as Cozumel, though I understand the Spanish call it the Isla de las Golondrinas."

"What? That's off the Yucatan coast." The opposite shore took on a new character. That was the Mayan jungle, the graveyard of a civilization. "How did we get here? Why did we sail here? We're halfway across the Caribbean!"

“The storm. It was like nothing I’ve seen on these waters. We’re still not sure what the date is. As for why... Will Graham brought us here. With you hurt, maybe... we didn’t know how long you’d be unconscious and Graham was the only one experienced enough to sail us through the storm. He brought us here.”

“So that’s why he’s strutting about without chains, then?”

Price ducked his head. “Didn’t seem right to chain him back up after he saved us all. And with you still recovering, who was going to give that order?”

“Who, indeed?” asked Beverly. She was standing behind Price, and when Jack looked her way she just shrugged one shoulder and slipped out.

“Then what was that little display just now.”

Price made a face. “There’s ruins in the jungle, just back from the beach. Old ones. Some of the crew wanted to loot them, maybe set up camp in there. Graham stopped them, insisted we stay away. Brian got involved, I think just to spite Graham, and it got ugly. Brown and some of the crew backed Graham and, well, you saw.”

“And why are my crew backing a convicted pirate against their own bosun? Are they going to start rolling cannonballs at night?”

Price winced. “It’s not like that, Jack. No one’s talking mutiny, especially not now that you’re upright again. It’s just... you have to understand Jack, that storm... we thought we were all going to die. Some of us did die. And he sailed us through. You know how superstitious sailors are. They think he’s charmed, that’s he got the favour of a sea-goddess.”

Jack could understand that, even if he didn’t like. The drowning clung to whatever raft they could. Quieter, he asked, “How many did we lose?”

“Between the battle and the storm, almost twenty dead or lost. And twice again that many injured or sick. I have the bill written up, and the surgeon has the sick-tent down the beach when you’re ready.”

“And how about the ship? How did my *Bella* fare?”

Price perked up some. He was most at home with figures and charts and the science of a ship’s internal economy. “She took a beating, but nothing crippling, nothing we haven’t been able to repair. We’re down by three guns on the port broadside and one on the starboard and very low on cordage and spars and sailcloth. The biggest loss is the mizzentopmast. It was too damaged to repair, and the wood around here is all mangrove, nothing to build a mast from. If you’ll give me a moment, I can collect my books and give you an itemized-“

“Thank you, Mr. Price. Jimmy. That won’t be necessary tonight. I trust your summary. For now, why don’t you keep Mr. Zeller busy making ready to sail again, let him cool off.”

“Yes, sir. Do you want me to have someone bring you dinner?”

“No, not yet.” Jack hauled himself to his feet, wavered for a moment. “I will visit the wounded.”

The sun was beginning to dip as Jack walked from his tent to the improvised hospital tent down the beach. Fresh-cut logs and a ragged sailcloth. Not the worst sick bay Jack had ever seen, far from the worst. At least it had fresh air. The surgeon was a mousy, withdrawn man with a nigh-incomprehensible Créole accent who’d joined in Port-au-Prince. He’d claimed to be a freeman, despite the urgency of his embarkation, but neither Jack nor anyone else on the crew had much interest in investigating.

There were a dozen injured and sick cases still under the surgeon’s care, the rest having recovered. Or died. A few broken bones, a few cases of exhaustion and dehydration, and one with a cracked skull. When Jack asked if the sailor would live, the surgeon just shrugged. Jack shook hands and said encouraging words.

Sunset painted the horizon, and the smell of roasting meat floated down the beach. Jack’s stomach rumbled, commanding him to join the feast, but he stopped to look across the water to the *Quo Bella* where she floated at anchor. A lovely ship. A bit battered, perhaps, but lovely to his eyes. He saw the places where she’d been holed and patched, saw the frayed and spliced cables. “Oh, beauty, beauty, why are you gone from me,” he whispered.

“If you could find her,” Beverly asked, “Would you want to? Would you want to know where she has been?”

Jack didn’t look away from his ship. “I know where she is. And I know she’s waiting for me there. The sea took her from me, and someday it will take me to her.”

“It was a storm.”

“Yes, a storm.”

“A freak storm, sudden and unseasonal yet so fierce.”

“Yes it... it was.” Jack turned and looked Beverly in the eye. “Do you expect me to believe there’s a connection to what we just survived?”

“Ask Will Graham.” And she was gone.

Jack joined the feast and mingled with his crew. He even came to laugh with them, and sing. The crew was mixing freely, no sign of earlier strife or division. Will Graham sat just outside the ring of fires, not segregated but adjacent, with Brown and a few others telling sea stories and tall tales. Every time Jack looked their way, Graham was looking right back.

Rum and roasted meat and the hot, heavy air took their toll and not long after the moon showed its face the crew began to drop, snoring where they lay until only Jack, Graham and the mostly-sober sentries remained. Jack rose, crossed to Graham and gestured for him to follow. They strode out to the water’s edge and stood staring up at the stars for a long moment before Jack said, “I did not expect, when I played out this hunt in my mind, that I would thanking you for saving my ship and my crew. But here I am.”

Will shrugged and said nothing.

“How was it, being back on the quarterdeck?”

This time Jack could see the emotion in Will’s face. “Like fresh water in the desert. I’d forgotten how much I’d missed it.”

“You felt alive again.”

“Yes.”

“For the first time since you wound up in Chilton’s durance vile.”

Will brushed his thumb across his ruined eye socket. An unconscious gesture. “Longer.”

Jack came to a resolution. “How would you like to get the chance to feel that way again?”

“What do you mean, Jack?”

“I mean... I mean it’s time I find a new first mate.”

“And you’re offering me the job?”

“No. Not yet. Help me catch the *Ripper* and prove you’re not the man who sailed with Hannibal Lecter and then I will.”

Will turned and looked at Beverly, who stood calf-deep in the water. The waves lapped at the shore without acknowledging her existence. “How do you feel about that?”

Her tone was flat, strangled. “I’m in no position to contest it, am I.”

“Alright, Jack,” Will said, “I’ll take your offer. It’s been a long time since I could feel righteous in action.”

“For now, consider yourself a member of the crew. No more chains, no more locks. You can be my navigator, but you’ll give no orders and you’ll carry no weapons.”

“Zeller won’t like that.”

“Zeller finds reasons not to like most things. He’ll adapt, he’s a good sailor and a good bosun.” They were silent again, contemplating the stars and void above them, or perhaps within them. “Will, were you still with Lecter in ’29?”

“In every sense. Are you going to ask me about a storm? A storm that sprang up and stole your beauty from while you could do nothing?”

“I... yes. Was that... was that Lecter’s doing?”

“He had exactly as much to do with it as he did with the storm that drove us here.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t think you’re ready to see, Jack, not yet. But you’ll have to, when we get there.”

“Get where? You know where Lecter is now?” Jack had to restrain the urge to grab Will and shake him. “Tell me where he is!”

Will pointed one finger to the west, to the shadowed jungle across the water. “On the other side of that jungle, in Campeche.”

“Campeche? What’s he doing in Campeche?”

“Waiting for us, Jack. And, I imagine, hosting dinner parties.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for continuing to read. Based on some questions, and my own need to keep things straight in my head, I wrote up and posted a (partial) timeline of the events leading to the start of the story. If you've gotten this far, it won't spoil anything. :) You can find it here: http://malcolmwritesinspace.tumblr.com/post/124762349688/timeline-for-dead-men-dark-seas-and-a-place-for

An Offering of a Lamb

Chapter Summary

A dinner party is rudely interrupted. A lamb is led to its fate. A plot is revealed.

Campeche, June 1736

The stars in the night sky shone brilliantly, but not so brilliantly as the paper lanterns strung from every cable above the perfectly scrubbed and painted deck of the good ship *Mostro del Mare*, and every luminary, socialite, merchant, nouveau riche, military officer and noble in Campeche was there to glitter beneath them. Music and laughter spread across the bay and up to the walls of the fort.

Sailors in white gloves and powdered wigs circulated among the guests, bearing food and drink on silver platters. None of the platters were from matching sets and the sailors' finery couldn't disguise the tattoos and scars beneath, but this was all part of the charm. Eating off plundered plates and served by the men and women who'd done the plundering just added a frisson of thrill to a social occasion. There was dancing, and wooing, and even the occasional duel to enliven things. It was the third such event held aboard the *Mostro* in the two months since her captain had arrived in Campeche and kicked off a frenzy of balls and routs like the city had never seen. The music, it was generally agreed, was best at the Governor's events, and Doña Hidalgo's gardens were the best for intrigues and rendezvous, but no one could equal the food aboard the *Mostro.*

Capitan Isaac Cordero, of His Most Catholic Majesty's Army, was watching the dancers, entranced. The local fashions ran to colour and flare made any a spectacle, but Cordero had eyes only for the Captain and Mrs. Fel, their hosts. Captain Fel was dressed simply, elegant in a dark, closely-fitted suit that suggested military while still flattering, and Mrs. Fel complemented him in a dress that made her look like she was clothed in gold, or the sun. In the lantern-light she almost seemed to glow, and Cordero swore she was seeking eye contact with him all through the night.

The dance ended in a flourish that the Fels executed with such grace Cordero thought his heart would burst. They straightened to the polite applause of the onlookers. Captain Fel, tall and sculpturally handsome like the weathered effigy of some forgotten pagan king, seemed to soak in the attention, smiling gently and making eye contact. Mrs. Fel slipped sideways out of the light, still the picture of grace but with a hidden yearning to be elsewhere, like a cat that wants out to hunt the birds. Cordero was sure he was the only one who could see it.

Captain Fel spread his hands and said, in courtly Spanish with just the faintest hint of an Italian accent, "My friends and guests, we will dance again in time, but for now... shall we

eat?" This raised a cheer and applause slightly more enthusiastic than was strictly dignified, and Captain Fel pointed back to the hatchway leading belowdecks like stage magician.

The platter was so large it required four burly sailors and raised gasps from the partygoers as they processed what they beheld.

"Is that... is that a *mermaid*?" someone asked in a shocked, titillated tone.

Captain Fel let the question hang for a long moment, let the gathering onlookers get a good look at the beautifully arranged display from finned tail through exposed ribcage decorated with precisely wound flowers to tentacled head. And in the centre, a tenderly cooked heart, sliced into bite-sized morsels and reassembled with dozens of tiny swords. "Not a mermaid, if you'll forgive my artistic conceits, but a-"

"The tail of a *sphyrna mokkaran*, that is the great hammerhead shark," interrupted an unmusical voice with an unfashionable Catalan accent. Professor Torpe, visiting from the University of Madrid, shoved his way to the front and bent over the tableau, peering through a monocle. "Married to the thorax of a *tursiops truncatus*, the common dolphin, and the head, of course, is an *octopus vulgaris* with the muscular hydrostats removed. I don't recognize the heart or the meats in the thorax, however. They look almost-"

Captain Fel caught the Professor's wrist before he could poke the heart. Cordero blinked. He hadn't registered the captain crossing the deck. "Come now, Professor, where is the fun in spoiling *all* the mystery?" A suspicious listener might hear a note of anger behind the playful words, and Cordero was suspicious even as his heart beat for the beauty of the Fels. "Chiyoh," Captain Fel said over his shoulder without releasing the Professor's wrist, "Chiyoh, why don't you take the professor down to the galley. Professor, we still have the shark's cranium intact if you would like to dissect it. I assure you my kitchen implements are up to the task." The professor was delighted by this and happily shuffled off with Fel's first mate, Chiyoh. "And now," Fel said to the crowd, "perhaps we can address our food with living appetites instead of dead languages." That raised a laugh, and under Fel's guidance two sailors began distributing plates of 'mermaid'.

"Such a shame Colonel de Ivo couldn't be here," one socialite said with a disingenuous simper. "He might have found this meal more to his liking." Ivo was Cordero's commanding officer, and at the last of Captain Fel's dinners he'd gotten embarrassingly drunk and loudly complained about how dainty and unmanly the food had been. Cordero had been required to drag Ivo home, and hadn't been at all sad to hear Ivo had gone on one of his periodic jaguar hunts, which he announced by leaving a note for his valet in disregard for all proper protocol. Not that Cordero had even known Ivo to give a single fart for protocol.

Captain Fel smiled like the comment was a witty jest, and replied. "I think he might have. If he were here I'm sure he'd eat his own heart out." Another laugh, and the company dissolved into knots of conversation and mingling. The band struck up a cheerful melody in the background.

Cordero had a plate of food pressed into his hands, and he ate while looking around. The food was all perfection. The heart was so savoury and succulent it made Cordero's knees weaken. Then, there, a flash of gold disappearing down belowdecks. Did she glance his way?

Cordero set his scraped plate aside and followed after when he was sure no one could see him go.

The deck below was warm, trapping the heat of the day and the blaze of the kitchen fire. Cordero crept along, his heart hammering in his chest. He swore the sound of the ocean lapping against the hull was whispering his name in her voice. He padded past a room that spilled light into the gloom. Inside, Professor Torpe was bent over a table, back to the door. Cordero could hear the scrape of a knife and the professor's muttering. He moved on, towards the great cabin at the stern of the ship.

She was sitting in an open window when Cordero entered, framed against the wide panorama of the nighttime sea and the rising moon. He stood there, rapt and aware only of her radiance. At length she turned to him, looked him directly in the eye. He felt his knees buckle, not only from her beauty but from a great pressure, bearing him down like the fall of a wave on a helpless swimmer. She rose, and moved towards him, and he felt the pressure ease.

As she came closer, Cordero could see a single unshed tear glittering in the corner of her eye. "My lady," he exclaimed, crossing the room to her side a stride so long it was almost a leap, "What is wrong? Who has brought you this low? I swear I will aid you however I can!"

Mrs. Fel took his hand in hers and smiled gently, sadly. "So sweet. So young. I do not think I could bear to see you hurt."

Cordero bore himself up. "My lady, I am a Cordero of Valladolid. My family has fought the enemies of Spain since before there was a Spain! My forebears marched beside El Cid himself! And never have we failed in our duty or shirked from danger. And I swear on my blood I will aid you." Something in the air around them sizzled, but Cordero was too rapt to notice.

"It's... it's my husband," Mrs. Fel almost whispered.

"Your husband, Captain Fel? Does he lay hands upon you? That is no way for-"

"He keeps me caged here, Isaac," she said, and Cordero's blood thundered a little harder to hear her say it. "I would be *free.*"

Cordero dropped to one knee. "My lady, I swear to you I will see you freed!"

"Well," said Captain Fel from the doorway, "This has all the trappings of an oath-swearing? Is it fealty? Or fillial?" He looked faintly amused.

Cordero whirled to his feet, placing himself between Captain and Mrs. Fel. His sword flew out with a rasp, but Fel's expression never changed. Just that amused half-smile. "Captain," Cordero proclaimed, "This woman is under my protection! No more will you hold her in bondage! Step aside!"

Fel stepped forward into the room, and Cordero became aware of him in fullness. Where Mrs. Fel was radiant, a light in the night that filled up the space around her and inside Cordero, Captain Fel was a void, pulling everything into himself inexorably. Cordero could

feel himself succumbing and knew it was only moments before he was on his knees again, this time to offer himself to Captain Fel. With a cry and a stiff wrist, he plunged his sword into Fel's breast. His technique, as always, was flawless. The sword point went between Captain Fel's sixth and seventh ribs, just to the left of his sternum, exactly skewering his heart and lung before grinding against the bottom of his shoulder blade on its way out his back.

Cordero had driven his sword into Captain Fel almost to the hilt, and he released it in shock. He had killed in battle, and on the field of honour, but this was the murder of an unarmed man. Still, it was in an honourable cause, the defence of a woman, so perhaps... So consumed with his crime was Cordero that he realized only belatedly that Captain Fel did not fall.

"You are a romantic, Capitan Cordero," Captain Fel said calmly, almost clinically, studying the sword hilt jutting from his breast like a bothersome spot of mud, "and Romanticism is the practice of envisioning the past and the future as the best we could wish them to be. Tell me, Isaac, what future did you envision for yourself after killing me?"

Cordero quailed. His legs felt rubbery and some part of his brain was screaming at him to run, cast aside honour and *run* from this thing in the shape of a man. Only the presence of Mrs. Fel at his back kept him there, though he wouldn't have been able to answer where that was his will or hers.

The pain, when it came, was both consuming and distant. Cordero found himself on the floor, clawing for breath through a crushed throat. He gazed up and saw Mrs. Fel looking down upon like she felt... nothing. The unshed tear in her eye finally fell, and it filled up Cordero's rapidly narrowing vision like a vast, sparkling meteor. He was dead before it splashed on the deck.

"What do you want me to do with this one," Chiyoh asked from the door. She held Professor Torpe's corpse by the collar, its neck twisted and bulging.

"Two murders in one night, Hannibal?" Mrs. Fel asked. "There's only so many convenient disappearances these people will accept."

"Killing this one," Hannibal Lecter replied, "is no more murder than swatting the fly buzzing in your ear. He will not be missed." He knelt down and patted Cordero's rapidly cooling cheek. "And as for this one... when the fisherman pulls the fish out of the sea and lets it suffocate, is the air responsible? You drew this young man into my path knowing what I would. You killed him and surely as a lack of air."

Mrs. Fel's spine stiffened. "Are you just an actor, then, following a script without agency?"

"But who wrote the script?"

"There's a ship out there," Chiyoh said abruptly, "watching us."

Hannibal straightened. "Yes, I know." And he turned and looked Jack Crawford in the eye.

Out in the bay, aboard the *Quo Bella*, Jack jerked back from his telescope in horror. Had Lecter just... no, no, he couldn't have seen out across the night sea.

"Hello, Jack," Hannibal said from behind him, and Jack's heart tried to leap out his mouth.

Jack clamped down as much as could as he turned, stifling the urge both to run and to attack Lecter with nothing more than his telescope. As he turned, he noted distantly that the night was filling in with fog. Things felt... slow. Muted.

Hannibal Lecter was standing behind him, leaning with deceptive casualness on the ship's wheel. Beyond him the ship was distant and cloudy, populated with unmoving wraiths. All the colour had been leeched from the world until Lecter seemed oversaturated, the dark colours of his suit bold and rich. Lecter seemed to intuit Jack's sluggish horror and smiled without parting his lips, one corner curling up in a manner that suggested warm, friendly humour. It made Jack's soul curdle. He tried to reach for his sword but his body refused to obey. "Don't fret, Jack. I will not harm you today. I want to help you. Give up this quest. Sail to Barbary, or Surinam, or home. Live. You will not want to see what this road will show you."

Jack struggled to speak or deny or curse, but nothing came. Lecter walked forward, graceful and hypnotic, and placed one hand on Jack's shoulder. "In a way, all the death and fear, the things you would put a rope around my neck for, you are culpable for, too. You stole what didn't belong to you and brought me here, to this place of life and death in riotous variety. You called the tiger into the nursery, and then you threw away the key." Lecter paused, and his grip on Jack's shoulder tightened like a vice. "You took what was most precious to me and sank it to the bottom of the sea. So I took your most precious gift and locked it away where you can never go." He leaned in close and whispered, "Perhaps I'll send you there after I eat you."

"Hannibal?" Will Graham stood at the top of the stairs, chest heaving as though from running, and looked at Lecter with a mix of fear and hope and hunger. He took a hesitant step forward, hand reaching out as though for a mirage or a lifeline. "Are you..."

Lecter turned away from Jack, and Jack felt like he'd surfaced from drowning so great was the relief. Lecter and Will embraced, tightly, urgently. Jack could only see Will's face, and in it he was terror and joy and desperation. "Hello, Will," Hannibal murmured. They were silent a long while before Hannibal said, "There is still a place for you by side. We can leave here, together."

"You know I can't do that, not without her. Not until you return her to me." Will's face pinched in sudden pain and he slid down Lecter until he was kneeling on the deck, looking up at Hannibal in rapture. "Please."

Hannibal leaned forward and took Will's chin in his hand. "You know I can't do that, Will. What happened to Abigail was a consequence of your betrayal." Jack realized Lecter was growing, his clothes turning blue-black and shrinking into his body. Vast and irregular antlers thrust from his head, and his feet became cloven hooves that glowed with heat. "You have only yourself to blame for her fate, Will. Accept that and come back with me. We can be as we once were."

“I wish... I can’t. I have save her—augh!” Will contorted in agony, held up only by the Beast’s taloned grip on his chin. He buckled and tried to curl up, and Jack could see a glowing line beneath his shirt.

The Beast released Will to collapse onto the ground. “Then remember how I left you before. I will not be so kind again.” Will clawed his shirt up, and across his belly an old, gnarled scar was glowing from within like a rod left too long in the fire.

Jack blinked, and The Beast was Lecter again, sophisticated and charming. He stepped to Jack and patted him gently on the shoulder. “I look forward to having you at my table, Jack. I’ll be waiting.”

And then he was gone. Colour and sound and motion returned to the world. Jack gasped and nearly fell. For a long moment he tried to convince himself it had been a fever-dream, a last flicker of the opium visions he had seen as he slept the storm through. But there on the deck were cloven hoofprints seared into the wood, and there was Will Graham, curled up and shuddering. Jack gritted his teeth and stood upright. “Let’s go sink that bastard,” he ground out.

“Can’t,” said Will between gulped breaths. “We can’t. He’s protected by the fort. Blow us out of the water before we got close. He’s charmed them, enchanted them.”

“So then what do we do? Wait for him to sail out?”

Will hauled himself to his feet, in the process giving Jack a good look at the scar across his belly. It was a smile, he realized absurdly. Will’s cheeks were cut and a scored by claws, blood matting his scruff and staining he teeth. It reminded Jack of a wolf after a kill. No, not a wolf. Will had none of the cautious grace. A stray dog, beaten once too often and surviving on carrion. Jack just hoped this dog would know better than to run back when the whistle blew.

They stood together, looking across the sea at the lights of the city. When the breeze drifted just right, they could catch snatches of music and laughter. “No,” Will said. “No matter where you chase him, he will have an advantage. Maybe you could batter him, but he’ll still escape and leave you among corpses. No, we need to lure him out.”

“And how do we do that?”

Will pointed across the water. “We lure him out, make him come to us by holding something he needs to have back.”

Jack thought about that. “You mean that skull.”

“I do.”

“And you know where that is.”

“I do. In Hannibal’s palace in the place beyond the lightning.” Will hesitated. “Jack, doing this means walking through a door into a darkness that will change you. Irrevocably. That’s

what he does, what he *really* does. He makes us make choices, just to see what we do. And sometimes you can't come back from them."

Jack thought about freak storms and vanished ships. "There are sacrifices that demand to be made."

Will nodded sadly. "Yes. And we do make them even knowing they're on his altar. Because we have no choice in the end. Fortunately, the choices Hannibal forces others into are not always to his benefit, and his sense of the artistic demands he let them play out. He is betrayed."

Across the water, another meeting transpired.

Hannibal straightened. "Yes, I know." And he turned and looked Jack Crawford in the eye.

Mrs. Fel watched as he *stepped* across to the other ship, leaving behind swirling motes of dust and light that briefly assumed the countenance of a man. She watched as Chiyoh bore one body away to the well-guarded butchery in the sunless hole below, where the eyes of gods nor men could reach.

Mrs. Fel reached into the air above Cordero's corpse and pulled free a shimmering mass. Gold speckled with faint patches of green and crimson. The soul of a romantic, of an innocent. She smiled sadly to see the images that flickered in the depths of it, to see her own face haloed and adored. She slipped out the window, holding the soul tightly, and dropped to the sea.

The waters rushed up to cradle her, embrace her, until there was no clear place where she ended and the sea began. She heard the life and the death beneath the waves, the singing of the newly born and the laments of the ancient drowned and behind all that, a song just for her to show her the way home. But most of all she felt the golden chain that bound her to the *Chesapeake Ripper*. She walked out to the end of the chain's length and said, "I am here."

"Do you have the key?" Beverly asked. She hovered just above the waves, huge wings flapping slowly. The moon behind her gave her a nimbus, and filtered *through* her like light between poorly fit floorboards. "Did you bring me what I need, Niamh Fand?"

Mrs. Fel shrugged slowly. "That is an old name, Beverly."

"What would you prefer? Bedelia?"

"And that is a dead one. Mrs. Fel will do for now." She held up the soul. "Here is what you need."

Beverly reached out and the soul sped into her hand like a hooked fish and began to orbit her in lazy, irregular loops. Mrs. Fel looked down at her hand, at the scalded flesh there where she'd held the soul. "A small price," she said. "And a fair one."

"Won't your husband notice that?"

Mrs. Fel smiled faintly. “Hannibal has decided I am not the replacement he is looking for, so he now sees me as something static, unchanging. Fixed by his will. And what about Will Graham? Can you trust that he will act as we need him to?”

“I trust that he will act as he needs to. That will have to be enough. He can take us to the place beyond the lightning. He *needs* to take us there.”

“And when his needs no longer fit with ours?”

Beverly shrugged, unconcerned. “It will not take much to remind Jack what Will Graham really is, and Jack always does the *right* thing.”

An Interlude Domestic

Chapter Summary

A quiet family moment is interrupted by a harbinger of things to come.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience. I had some technical problems, but those have been resolved and I'm back to regular writing. I have a gift exchange fic to finish, so the next full chapter should be up sometime next week. In the meantime, please enjoy this interlude at a certain pig farm...

Verger Ranch, north coast of Jamaica, June 1736

The baby was crying.

It was a hot, humid evening. The sun had set, but the heat of the day still lay upon the massive house like a heated blanket or an abusive hand. Margot Verger was familiar with both, but at least the heat was the only thing that made her break out in a sweat these days.

In the room behind her, inside through the glass doors and billowing curtains, she heard a soft voice murmuring and the baby's cries turned to contented coos. A moment later Alana emerged onto the balcony, the baby suckling at her breast. She wore motherhood well, and Margot smiled to see it. Alana smiled back, weary and contented. The night breeze brought the tang of sea air and the sound of sleeping pigs and, far off, snatches of song.

"Nice night," Beverly said from the other end of the balcony. Margot nearly leapt out of her skin, but Alana was as calm as still water. Beverley was perched on the balcony rail, her wings visible only as suggestions where they touched the moonlight. Margot did her best not to look at the multisected shadow Beverly cast. Shadows shouldn't drip.

"Hello, Beverley," Alana said, pitching her voice low and smooth. "Is it nearly time?"

"It is." Beverley held out one hand, displaying the golden, twitching orb she held. It seemed to Margot that in that spectral light Beverley's fingers had the look of raven's claws, smooth and sharp. "I go now to open the way. Is everything prepared here?"

Margot thought of the secret room beneath the house, guarded with wards three times three, the circle inscribed with family's blood unwillingly taken, and a pair of fat eels that swam in

a tank. “It is,” she replied.

“Does Will know?” Alana asked. “Does Jack?”

“They know as much as they can know to play their parts.”

Alana sighed and bounced the baby in her arms. The baby looked at Beverley once and cooed, then burped resonantly and fell asleep. “Poor Jack,” Alana said, almost to herself.

Beverley cocked her head. “No sympathy for Will Graham?”

Alana shook her head. “I know what he plans to do once through the gate, and I can’t forgive it.”

Beverley made a hollow clack with her beak. Beak? No. Margot looked again and saw just Beverly. Beverly clicked her tongue. “A bleeding heart demands action.”

Without speaking, Margot and Alana took each other’s hands. They were both thinking of thrashing limbs and thrashing eels and screaming and drowning and blood in the water, and they were thinking of guilt and release and horror and joy. “We know that better than most,” Margot said, “but to carve your catharsis from someone else? From an innocent?”

“There are no innocents on that ship,” Beverley said.

“And you can tell the difference that easily?”

“Yes.”

The silence stretched on. The sea breeze at last began to cool the air, and Margot could make out the distant song as a lament, a dirge for the lost. She shivered. “We’ll do our part,” she said. “The circle is prepared.”

Beverly nodded neutrally, and then with a single wing-beat she was gone. Margot and Alana looked at each other for a long time, the baby murmuring sleepily between them. They went inside.

The Straits and Narrows

Chapter Summary

Jack must navigate twisting passages and conversations on the sail to Maracaibo.

At Sea, June 1736

Sweet days and good sailing.

They sailed back around the Yucatan and ran south along the coast of Mexico towards the Spanish Main. Will had told Jack their destination was Maracaibo, the great port into the heart of Venezuela, but refused to be drawn further. Ever since Cozumel, and especially after their encounter with Lecter, Jack had felt a fragile relationship building between them. It was so tenuous that he feared it would be broken by the slightest jolt, and so he didn't press Will for more details.

The trip was blessed with clear skies and a steady wind from the north-west that sped them on their way. So steady they scarcely needed to touch a cable or sail nearly until they'd raised the coast of South America. The ship fell into a routine. Splicing, mending, patching and painting in unhurried progression until only the most careful of scrutiny could have seen that marks of storm and battle on the *Quo Bella*.

Jack noticed that as often happened at this point in a voyage, the crew began to gel in easy company. The divisions between old salts and new landsmen began to fade. Even the palest of them was browned by the sun. The crew cautiously accepted Will Graham into their mess groups when he didn't eat with Jack or, more often, alone in his cabin. Brown was ever at his side, and it was in his company that Jack saw a loosening of the guarded fear in Will's eyes. A small group of sailors began to orbit Will and Matthew, until Zeller half-jokingly named them the wolf pack.

The events off Campeche gnawed at Jack. What he had seen felt almost like a dream that would burn away in the sun and wind, until he saw again the hoof prints seared into his deck or the way Will sometimes wrapped one arm across his belly and stared into the watery depths.

Finally, on the night they raised the coast of Panama and began to run east-by-north-east towards the Gulf of Venezuela, Jack asked Will, "What is Lecter, truly? I see now that he's far from just a man."

Will laughed without humour. They were standing at the rail, watching the coast slide by in the deepening gloom. "He was, once, I think. At least in body if not in soul. He told me

about his sister, how she was murdered. But I don't think that's what made him. I don't think anything *made* him. I think he *happened.*"

"A sister..." Jack murmured. Then, aloud, "The skull. His sister's?"

"Yes. He followed it here from somewhere else, and we spent years hunting it."

"So it's true. I brought him here. If I had listened to de la Corazon..."

"Maybe. Maybe she would have taken it over the edge of the world and dragged him after, but I don't think so. Hannibal Lecter wants to be a part of the world. He wants to see it and alter and... taste it. And most of all he wants to make it as he is. He is looking for a connection, something to hold him in the world. That's what his sister was, once. And now he keeps looking to recreate her in someone who won't break in his hands."

Jack nodded slowly, and looked down at the water rushing past the side of the ship. "Is that what you were?"

Will let out a long, whispering breath. "Yes."

"And then you broke?"

"Yes. And no. I found… something that wasn't in his plan, so he took it from me and threw me aside. But he left me with a smile for our memories." He was, Jack realized, talking about the huge scar across his belly.

"What he took from you. Can you get it back?"

The question hung in the air, and Jack had the sudden feeling he was balancing on a knife edge. Will looked up, and Jack saw the decision in his eyes. "No. I can't." And that was the closing of the door. Will straightened up and walked away. He went down into the waist, threading between idling sailors and sitting down close beside Brown. They held hands in the gloom, and their little circle, the wolf pack, gathered around.

Jack went to bed. He had lost his window into Will's past, though in truth he didn't want to see through it any more than he already had. He knew what must be done, and he knew enough of Will to know that Will would help him. He was dreadfully wrong, but he didn't know *that*.

They rocked at anchor in the rising dawn, and the crew were gathered at the rail, looking across the waters to where the spray of surf marked the entrance to Lake Maracaibo, the Tablazo Strait. A few fishing boats and coastal luggers could be seen moving around the bay, and far off to the east something large was hove to. The crew were convinced they could see a huge Spanish flag hanging off the spanker and more than a few, especially the wolf pack, were staring at it with the hungry memory of the old treasure galleons.

Jack lowered his telescope and stared with naked eye at the strait. "The last time I came this way, we hired a pilot to take us through into the lake."

“I can do it,” Will said, and Jack heard Zeller hiss behind them.

“You sure you’re up for it?” Jack asked as though he hadn’t heard. Will nodded, and Jack turned away from the rail. “Mr. Zeller, hands to braces and bring up then anchor. Mr. Graham, when you’re ready.”

Will stood next to the wheel, feet spread and hands clasped behind him. It was the pose of an officer in command, and Jack was surprised to see how natural it looked on him. A natural sea officer. “Mainsails only,” Will called, and Zeller looked like he could spit while he repeated the orders. “We have to make two turns through the strait, then we make all sail and pull out before the current drags us into a bar. We must do this quickly, so stand by your braces!”

It was agonizing. The ship crept forward under just enough sail to give them steerage-way, a lazy swirl of wake behind them as the strait grew ever closer. The early morning breeze threw surface against the shore where they shouldn’t go. Will stood silent, perfectly still beside the wheel with all eyes on him when they weren’t ahead. To run aground here would mean a best a long day of backbreaking labour to haul the ship back into the water. At worst, wreck and ruin on a foreign shore. While England and Spain were nominally at peace again the old animosities ran deep, and besides the jungle would likely swallow them up before they even saw a Spaniard.

The breeze stiffened, and the *Quo Bella* heeled over a notch as she picked up speed. If Will noticed, he didn’t react. Then the surf and shoals were close, faster than they should have been. Will reached out and took one side of the wheel. Jack replaced the sailor on the other side. If his ship was to wreck, he’d have a hand in it. At the bow, the sailors calling out the depth were growing nearly frantic as the bottom rose up.

“Steady, steady,” Will murmured, so quiet he might have been speaking to himself. The *Quo Bella* shuddered as her keel scraped the seabed and then they were through the first shoals. A few whoops went up, then were cut off as Will hauled the wheel over and steered the ship hard to port. Jack saw the edge of sails begin to flap as they came close to the wind. If they came over too far they’d lose speed and strike the shore side-on. Then Will hauled them back to starboard so sharply a few sailors nearly lost their footing. “All sail,” he cried, and this time Zeller didn’t hesitate to repeat the order. They had mere moments to gain speed before wind and current pushed them aground. The great sails unfurled, flapped, then bellied out as they caught the wind and the ship began to carve through the water. This time there were unbridled cheers, and Jack clapped Will on the shoulder after they’d surrendered the wheel to the duty sailor and set a course for Maracaibo.

“Damn fine sailing,” he said, still flush with the tension and relief. “And a lot faster than hiring a pilot boat and getting towed through.”

Will smiled ironically and pointed over the rail to the jungle shore. “If we’d crawled through under tow, they’d have swarmed out here in canoes and killed us all.”

Jack trained his scope on the shore and swore softly as he saw human figures standing in the treeline, staring out at him. “Caribs, then?”

Will snorted. “Hardly. They’re mostly gone. Columbus and the pope saw to that. No, those are white men, the hungry and desperate who’ve gone feral in the jungle. They’re everything the Spanish - and the English, too – claimed the natives were to justify slavery and genocide.” His voice was climbing, his hands curling into fists. “You say you’re a hunter of monsters and killers, well maybe you should look at the crowned heads you serve instead of men and women driven to piracy by hunger and war. All these islands teemed with civilizations just two hundred years ago and now they are all graveyards. Tens, hundreds of thousands dead because a crown demanded gold.”

Jack forced iron calm into his voice. “You don’t need to tell me of the sins the kings of Europe have committed, Will. I know. But that doesn’t mean monsters like Hannibal Lecter can go free.”

Brown stepped forward and laid one hand on Will’s shoulder, and Will seemed to deflate as he realized he’d been shouting. “Sorry Jack. I just…”

“I know, Will.” Jack nodded to Brown, who led Will away. The outburst was uncharacteristic, but perhaps unsurprising. Whatever they had come to this brackish lake to find, it meant a step closer to catching Hannibal Lecter and confronting Will’s past.

Thunderbolts and Lightning (Very Very Frightening)

Chapter Summary

Jack and his crew follow Will Graham deeper into the dark, and not without cost.

Maracaibo, June 1736

Maracaibo, sweltering in the sun. The shore was low and flat, so silty it was almost a swamp. A stone fort loomed over the town, the same fort that had famously failed to stop Henry Morgan from escaping after he burned and looted everything on the lake and hadn't been any more use when the French came along to conquer the city a few years later. There days it watched over coffee shipments sailing for Europe and traders bringing goods in. Maracaibo was an island in the jungle, cut off from the rest of Venezuela.

"Not much to look at, is it?"

Jack turned from his study of the city. Price stood next to him, looking pensive. "Something on your mind, Mr. Price?"

Price fidgeted for a moment, then said, "I mean, I expected more, given its history."

Jack raised one eyebrow and asked, in a tone that encouraged haste, "And what history is that?"

"A lot of blood spilled over this place. They say it was named for a native chieftain, Mara. He led the fighting against the first European settlers, and when he died his people cried, 'Mara, kayo!' Mara has fallen. The settlers were so impressed by his bravery they named the lake for him."

"How kind of them." Jack's tone was as dry as old bones.

"That colony didn't last, of course. It took more tries and more killing before this," Price waved in the direction of the town, "stuck and lasted. Even then, it's been burned and looted by pirates and armies over and over."

"Takes a stubborn people to stay in a place like that."

Price nodded enthusiastically. He was warming to his subject. "Yes. And from what I hear, they're proud of their isolation from the rest of the local government."

"Was there a point to this history lesson, Mr. Price?"

"What? Oh, yes. It's just... there's been a lot of bloodshed here, and in not very much time."

“You could say that about the entire Caribbean. The entire New World.”

“I know, but... we need to be careful, Jack. There’s something wrong out here, something we can’t see. If there’s going to be more blood spilled on this lake, I don’t want it to be ours.”

Jack looked at Price, studied him. The other man was clearly disturbed and unsettled. Price tended to live half unaware of the world around him. He was more an accountant than a pirate-hunter, but then gold was as crucial as steel. Still, he had good instincts, and Jack had learned not to ignore Price’s intuitions. “Alright, Jimmy,” he said, “we’ll be careful.”

“And captain? If Will Graham takes you ashore somewhere... I’d rather not be the one left behind. I don’t want to end up like...” he trailed off, looked down.

“Like Beverley,” Jack finished for him. Price nodded, and Jack said, “Mr. Price, this time I intend to see that no one is left behind.”

“Do you think she sees us, Jack? If... *when* we take down Lecter I’d like it if she knew.”

Jack squinted up against the sun to look at the winged figure perched on the maintopmast. “I know she does, Jimmy. She’ll know.”

Will Graham walked over, and Price left. He didn’t look overly reassured, but Jack knew he’d do his duty. Will looked like most do before a hard fight, a mix of nerves and resolution. He didn’t speak at first, just joined Jack at the rail. Eventually, Jack said, “Jimmy was telling me to be careful, that this lake has seen a lot of death.”

“He’s right, more than he knows.”

“Is that why Lecter hid the skull here?”

“Yes, and no.” Will smiled his sardonic half-smile. “This lake is a gateway, it always has been, but two hundred years of invasion and death have corrupted that gateway into something Lecter can use, and we’re going to use it, too.”

Jack frowned. “Are we going inland, then?”

“Yes. And no. You’ll see.” He fell silent for a moment, then abruptly said, “We’ll need fresh supplies. I’ll give Price the list. There’s a few special items we must have, but it should just look like you’re restocking the smith. If anyone asks, you’re here hoping to get an early load of coffee beans. The harvest isn’t for weeks, but you’re English and they’re Spanish so they won’t be surprised by a blunder like that... what?”

“I know how to divert suspicion in a hostile port. I have been doing this for a while.” He paused for thought. “Do we need to worry about spies, someone reporting us to Lecter?”

Will snorted. “Hannibal Lecter knows exactly where we are and what we’re doing. He’s waiting to see what happens. No, there are... others who might interfere if they knew what we were doing.”

“Wonderful.”

“While you’re in town, may I borrow a boat and a few men? There are a few things I need to gather from the jungle. We should be back by sunset.”

Jack gathered a shore party and rowed over to the city. The locals bought the coffee load story with a rapidity that would have been insulting if Jack had actually considered himself an Englishman. He mangled the Spanish language and drank rich, bitter coffee with the harbourmaster while Price and his assistants bought supplies. Salt pork and greens, cordage and a spare sailcloth, the endless needs of a ship at sea, plus a few lengths of raw iron, chains and a new compass. It was, all things considered, a pleasant interlude. The locals were proud of their isolated independence, and the city was charmingly old-world.

Will was not back by sunset. The moon was rising over the lake before Jack heard the swish of oars in the water and the thump as the gig came alongside. Will came up first, clutching a heavy canvas bag, and immediately disappeared down into his cabin. Brown stayed to help the rest secure the boat. The men Will had taken were the wolf pack, and Jack felt a distance between him and them, even more than before. They moved together, worked together with the smoothness of a well-drilled gun crew and Jack couldn’t help but feel half a step out of sync as he pitched in to haul the boat aboard and stow it.

Afterwards, he pulled Brown aside. The younger man was obviously exhausted, caked with mud and sweat. “What happened out there, Brown?”

Brown hesitated, then looked Jack in the eye and said, “We lost O’Byrne, sir.”

Jack was aghast. In the dark and the commotion he hadn’t noticed a missing crewmember. “How? Why?”

“We’re not sure, sir. It was on the way back, after dark. He was bringing up the rear. We didn’t even notice him get taken. He just wasn’t there anymore. We went back and searched. There was some blood and drag marks, but... a jaguar, maybe. Or a croc.”

Jack nodded slowly, sure that everything he had just been told was a lie. He was careful not to let it show, and said, “A sad thing. I knew his sister, back in Cork.”

Brown winced. “Sad indeed, sir.” He yawned hugely. “Excuse me, sir, but I think I should find my hammock.” He sketched a salute and wandered off. He did not, Jack note, head for the crew deck but for Will Graham’s cabin. He also hadn’t actually told Jack what they’d gone into the jungle to do. Jack went to bed and hope he wouldn’t dream.

The next morning Will joined Jack for breakfast and ate ravenously. Eggs, bacon, coffee, ham. All fruits of Jimmy Price’s labours ashore to refill their stocks. Jack also ate expansively, knowing it wouldn’t be long before they were back to salt beef and hard tack, but without Will’s nearly desperate intensity.

Eventually they both slowed down until, as the plates were cleared away and they sipped coffee (with fresh cream, truly luxurious), Jack said, “So what’s our next step?”

Will took a large swallow, grimaced at the burn, and replied, “Today we sail deeper into the lake, find a place out of sight of the city where we can moor and make preparations for tonight.”

“And what happens tonight?”

“Tonight we penetrate Hannibal Lecter’s palace, his sanctum.”

“I’ve never heard of a palace on this lake.”

“That’s because it isn’t. Remember what I said about this place being a gateway?” He hesitated. “Jack, even after what you’ve seen, what happens tonight may be more than you’re prepared for. I need you to-“

“Trust you?”

Will flushed a little, coughed, hearing the rebuke in Jack’s voice, but forged ahead without responding to it. “To follow my lead, and to make sure your crew does, too. The transition will be delicate, and to falter is to risk ruin and death.” He lapsed into silence, sipping the dregs of his coffee, and Jack sensed he wouldn’t get anything more out of Will.

They made sail as the sun rose, heading south-east with the morning breeze fresh off the mountains. They followed the bottleneck channel from that sea to their lake and were clipping over the brackish waters of the lake itself by noon. They found a handy inlet where the jungle pressed close to that waters. The dark between the trees was impenetrable, even in the summer sun, and none suggested they go ashore.

The crew, led by Brown and the wolf pack under Will’s direction, made their arcane preparations while Zeller looked on in increasing consternation. They affixed iron rods to the tops of the masts and the bowsprit, and Will painted some foul concoction in apparently key places on the outside of the ship – including the eyes of the figurehead. It was sunset before Will proclaimed their preparations complete. Zeller and more than a few others of the more devout crew were muttering and hostile but none seemed ready to go against Jack’s orders.

The crew ate, and drank, and rested. Most were tense. They had no clear idea what was about to happen, just that something was. The wolf pack were eager, even energized, though Brown was clearly on edge. Will, by contrast, was utterly calm. Now that the moment was nigh, he had lost some of the jitters Jack had seen before.

The last smear of sunset faded, and all was starry night. Will joined Jack at the helm. “It’s time to go."

Jack gave the orders, and they set sail. The sails were a ghostly pale billowing above their heads. “What course, Will?”

“South.”

Zeller snorted. “And how will you find your landfall in this dark?’

“Believe me, we’ll see it.”

Clouds began to cover the sky as they sailed, blotting out stars and moon until it seemed they sailed through some abyss, where nothing existed outside their little pool of light. Then, ahead, flickers and fragments of light.

“What is that?” Zeller asked. “A lighthouse?”

“No,” Price said, verging on excitement, “I think that’s the Catatumbo Lightning! I’ve heard of it, but to see it...” He caught Jack’s quizzical look and explained, “The mouth of the Catatumbo River is subject to endless lightning strikes, like nowhere else. Nobody understands why.”

“It’s a gateway,” Will said, making Price jump. Will had taken the wheel and had been standing so quietly, so fixedly they’d forgotten he was there. “A place where worlds press against each other. The lightning is the energies of our world passing into the other one.”

Zeller barked a mocking laugh, and when Jack didn’t say anything he threw his hands up in disgust and stormed off. Price looked uncertain for a moment, then followed, leaving Jack and Will alone on the quarterdeck.

“And we’re going to ride those energies through to this... other place?” Jack asked, and Will nodded. “That’s what all the iron rods are for? To catch the lightning?” Another nod. “And what’s to stop us from being blown apart? I’ve seen what happens when wooden ships full of gunpowder are hit by lightning, Will.”

Will turned and looked Jack in the eye. In the dark, Jack could almost see an eyeball in Will’s ruined socket, a pale eye full of sadness. “That’s why we needed a sacrifice, Jack.”

“A sacrifice? ...O’Byrne wasn’t taken by a jaguar, was he?”

“No.” There was a long, pregnant silence. “His father and brother were aboard a ship we... the *Ripper* took off of Brazil.”

“I see.”

“I warned you this wouldn’t be easy. And his blood is hardly the first to feed this ship, Jack.”

The lightning was growing closer now, filling the horizon and turning the deck into a series of disjointed images, deep shadows and bright light and figure that seemed to leap and jolt across the ship. Ahead, Jack could make out a stretch of boggy land around a river mouth.

The first bolt struck the ship, sending sparks out from an iron rod. Then a second, and a third until they were being continually pounded by lightning strikes. The sound and light were overwhelming, and many of the crew had fled below decks or were lying curled on the deck covering their heads. Only Brown still stood, arms wide and head back, as those he were receiving a blessing.

The lightning died away, just long enough for the less-cautious to cause themselves all sorts of mischief. Then the lightning returned, so thick and fast that Jack’s world was just a riot of noise and light. He saw through watering eyes that the sigils and signs Will had painted along

the rail were glowing and beginning to smoke. Then an almighty blast that threw Jack to the ground. Light, strobing and flaring, filled his world and smashed him down into the black of dreams.

Island of Sacrifices

Chapter Summary

A memory, the incident that drove Jack to seek Will's help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Isla de Sacrificios, April 1736

Midnight, and the moon hid behind a heavy cloud. Jack Crawford thought sourly that even the moon who sees all the sins of night and darkness turned away from this place.

It was a small island, partially wooded, and it was at the moment difficult to find a place to step that wasn't ankle-deep in gore. There were two stone buildings in the centre of island, well-constructed but worn down by time and vandalism, of ancient make. Inside were a dozen corpses, hearts and limbs hacked off and the walls caked in blood. Outside a dozen more, bound and headless. And on the beach two more, posed as though they had slain each other in a duel. The last remains of the crew and passengers of the *Lofting Song*, a small sloop that had set out from Bristol carrying missionaries to the new world. The sloop itself was half-sunk in the island's shallow cove, only a few burnt stumps and floating debris still showing above the waterline.

Zeller stumped over, a scowl fixed on his face. "From that flies and the smell, this can't have been done more than a day ago." He spat and muttered some obscenity. "Damned Indians, carving up honest folk like this."

Jack raised an eyebrow and said, mildly, "Your honest folk were coming here to wipe away a culture that's been around longer than England's been a kingdom and replace it with one that teaches some men may keep others as property." Zeller flushed and his jaw worked, but Jack continued. "Still, this cannot be allowed. If it was natives..."

"It wasn't," said Matthew Brown as he emerged from the night. Zeller scowled harder, but Jack just raised one hand to let Brown speak. He was a well-made, well-read, handsome young man who'd joined their crew a few months ago and had proven himself an able sailor. And while he normally affected an inoffensive mien, Jack had seen the light in his eyes when it came time for blades and bloodshed. He indicated the beheaded prisoners and the posed duellists. "If this was a sacrifice raid, then this doesn't make sense."

Zeller sneered. "They got tired of cutting out hearts, obviously, and decided to have a little fun."

Brown shook his head. “I don’t think so. In 1518 the Spanish charted this island for the first time, and one of the explorers claimed they found fresh sacrifices in those two temples – cut apart and vivisected just like these people. That’s how the island got its name. But then in 1638, a couple of Dutch pirate crews took hostages from nearby and brought them here to wait for the ransom. One of them got bored and had a dozen of the prisoners beheaded and the heads sent to Veracruz. This turned into a duel between the two captains, killing one.” He paused to let his words sink in, then said, “I think someone recreated all the deaths this place has seen and left them for us to find.”

“Not someone,” Jack said heavily, “Lecter. He knew we were following and left this to taunt us. That’s why all the hearts are missing.”

“Then we’re close,” Zeller said, his voice heating, “Maybe we can still-“

The clouds passed from the moon like a stage curtain shooting up revealing the full horror of the island in brilliant light and hard contrast. The blood, Jack noticed absently, appeared quite black in the moonlight so that the corpses all appeared to be spilling out slow snakes of some vile tar.

Then, from across the island, “Sail ho! A sail!”

Jack, Zeller and Brown turned and ran without a word. Zeller slipped on a patch of gore and guts but Jack ran with the urgency of parent, a captain. The *Quo Bella* was anchored there, sitting idle with a skeleton crew led by his first mate Beverley Katz, and nearly helpless against attack. He cursed himself for his lack of caution. The island wasn’t just a taunt. It was a trap.

A large ship was just catching the wind in its sails to draw away as Jack burst from the trees onto the beach. A specific ship. The *Chesapeake Ripper*. His heart felt like it was clenched in ice.

Zeller stumbled to his side, panting. “It’s her! But... she’s leaving? Why?”

Jack knew. He ordered everyone into the boats, already knowing what they would find aboard the *Bella*.

The crew left aboard were all dead and hanging from the slashed and tangled remains of the ship’s rigging, the deck below them a horror-slick. They had been cut apart and strung up such that their corpses resembled a horrid boat suspended above the deck. And there, at the prow like a figurehead... The moonlight passed between the slowly swaying slices of Beverly Katz as between poorly-fit slats in a window. Her eyelids had been cut away so that her bisected face stared down at Jack.

Zeller, Brown and the others frothed with rage and grief and demanded they pursue the *Ripper* as it faded into the night but the *Bella* had been as crippled as Jack’s soul. The rigging was in tatters, the rudder chains cut, stores polluted with unspeakable portions of their friends. And they needed to bury the dead.

It took days, hungry and thirsty days before the *Bella* was seaworthy enough to limp into Veracruz for refit and resupply. They left behind them thirty-six graves, rows of crude crosses leavened with crescents standing sentinel over the island of sacrifices.

When finally they set sail from Veracruz Jack gave the order to sail east to Port Royal.

“We’re not going after the *Ripper*?” Zeller demanded.

“No. We have no idea where she makes port and every time we do get close it’s because Lecter wants us to. No, it’s time to recruit some help. I hear there’s someone in Port Royal who knows the *Ripper’s* habits. A man by the name of Will Graham.”

Chapter End Notes

I started rewatching Season 3 now that it's on Netflix and it got me back in the writing mood. I swear I'm going to finish thing. :P

A Desert Otherworld

Chapter Summary

Jack and his crew find themselves in a strange other place and must contend with monsters of legend if they are to reach the gates of Hannibal's palace.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somewhere Else, June 1736

White, hot, featureless desert stretched out in all directions. Heat rippled the horizon, giving the illusion of dark, looming, impossible mountains. Jack Crawford sat up, spat out blood and groaned. His mouth tasted of metal and his head pounded from the heat. All around, the rest of the crew were scattered and semi-prone like him. He tried to remember how they had come to this place, but all that came to him were the divine fists of the lighting and Will Graham's mad exultation as the ship had lurched and bucked her way to this strange place.

The ship...

Jack shot to his feet, then almost fell as the world span around him. The ship. Where was the *Bella*? There. She lay sadly canted over in a gully that seemed to be the only feature in this flat expanse. Her rigging was all askew and brown-edged holes and rents had been scorched into her canvas. Jack felt a wave of despair to see her so cruelly used and ground ashore so far from water. He made eye contact with Price, who sat cradling a still-groggy Zeller and the purser's gaze seemed to reflect Jack's own feeling.

"Up, up!" cracked a voice. Jack looked and saw Brown and Graham rousting the crew to their feet. Graham's little circle, the wolf pack, were the first to join them and Jack couldn't help but notice how much more energized they seemed. They dragged sailors to their feet and sent them stumbling toward the ship. "The river comes," Graham called, "get ready to make sail!"

"River?" Jack asked, "what river?"

Will gave him a grin of many teeth and little mirth. "The river of souls, Jack." And then he was gone, moving on towards the *Bella*.

A sound like thunder rolled across them, drawing out to a distant roar. "Look there!" a sailor called, pointing toward a thing, a disruption in the horizon.

"The river comes," Will repeated, and Jack realized what he was seeing. A wave of muddy, debris-carrying water rushing down the gully toward them. The kind of flash flood that

carried away towns and valleys in its rage. The realization gripped them all at the same time, and the stumbling toward the ship became a panicked running.

“This one’s dead,” Brown called, indicating a recumbent form.

“Leave them,” Graham called back. “Their soul is bound to this place now. Jack thought to argue, but that awful thundering fist of water rumbled nearer and so he grit his teeth, whispered a prayer for the dead and scrambled aboard the *Quo Bella*.

Almost everyone made it. One sailor, a woman who had been with Jack since the early days, was laggardly and the first snarling wave snatched her off the side of the ship and carried her away. Her shrieks were inaudible over the noise of the water.

The full force of the flash flood lifted the *Bella* and span her on her axis, spilling everyone to the deck. There were a few cries of pain as bones were bruised or broken by the impacts. Jack held onto the rail for dear life, sure that they would be capsized or holed or dashed against the banks until the ship’s seams started and leaked. But then the waters calmed and rose to fill the ravine and left the *Bella* floating peacefully. Carefully, gingerly, the crew rose, nursing bruised ribs and aching skulls. A few were helped below to the surgeon by their crewmates.

“Look there!” someone called, pointing out to the body of the one left behind. A ripple of gasps went up from the crew as a trickle of brown, murky water flowed impossibly over the river’s bank and became to snake towards the body like a living creature. The trickle became a small torrent that coiled around and pooled beneath the body and began to float it back towards the river. The body floated loosely, limbs moving with the languid ease of death, until it was pulled beneath the river with a soft sucking sound. One hand was the last to go, as though the dead sailor was waving farewell. Or, perhaps, beckoning the others to join them.

“Let that be a reminder,” Will Graham called. “Anyone who dies here, who is claimed by the river, they will be trapped here until the end of all things.”

And then, almost imperceptibly, they began to move. Just a gentle push at first, a suggestion of movement. Then the deck began to heel and the sound of water rushing past the hull grew to a gurgle and they were moving, carried by the current with slack sails and a dead rudder. The landscape moved with them, and also didn’t. The stain of dark sand where the river had reached out to take a body slid away from them but it seemed to Jack that it was moving while the desert remained still. He squeezed his eyes shut against the upsetting parallax and counted softly to ten.

When he opened them again, Will Graham was standing beside with a look of if not sympathy then understanding. “Don’t think about it too hard,” Will said. “This place doesn’t follow normal rules.”

“Where is this place? How is this place?”

Will frowned. “I don’t totally understand it. Hannibal brought me here a few times, but I never learned much beyond what he showed me. I do know that he didn’t call it into being. I think he stole the gate, or maybe found it.” Will pointed out to the shore, where a desiccated

stump and the broken tooth remains of stone buildings poked out of the sand. They moved past the ship with that same appearance of sliding along the ground, and Jack had another dizzying feeling that the ship and the desert were remaining still while the world moved over and past them. "I think there was something here before, something more than just the desert and a hungry river. I walked into the desert once, when it was becoming unbearable. I found things, scraps, ruins, remains. I think this was once a verdant place, created by the peoples of the Caribbean. But then the white men, we brought our guns and our diseases and our nailed god to kill them and to kill their cultures and we killed this place, too."

" Is this all there is, then. An empty desert? Are there no people?"

Will smiled bitterly. "Oh, no, there are others. Some of them you probably would not call people." He paused a moment, lost in reflection. Jack focused his gaze on those distant, impossible mountains. "When I was walking in the desert, I met things with no names, saw things I wish I never had. And I met a man. He spoke a language I'd never heard, but here that doesn't matter so much. He told me that this place is connected to something he called The Dreaming. He taught me how to step between the worlds, how to open the gate. The first gate."

"The first? Maybe it's time you told me the plan."

Will nodded slowly, then pointed out to the place. "Up there is the palace of Hannibal Lecter. Inside is the skull, the remains of his sister."

"And if we have that, he'll have to come to me, to face me on my terms."

"He can't help himself. He has to see what happens."

Jack nodded, and felt some of the iron in his spine again. Purpose, always purpose. "So what are these gates?"

"The first requires a key, a soul, ruled by the heart and taken cruelly." Will held up a hand to forestall Jack's objection. "The key will be waiting for us when we arrive. We're not the only ones who want to see Hannibal Lecter caught, Jack. Vengeance has wings, Jack."

"Then why bring me along if you have it all prepared?"

"Because it's prepared for you Jack. You are the tiger, the rider on the pale horse. The world moves for you because you demand it. The mountains don't tremble for me, Jack. And most of all, you are the third key. Yes, you. Only one who can see beyond themselves can walk into Lecter's sanctum and live." Will slapped the railing with the palm of his hand and drew himself up. "But first we have to get through those mountains without being eaten."

"Eaten?"

"If you've ever wished to be Odysseus, now's your chance, Jack," Will said with that wry, bitter smirk. "And before you say that Odysseus got to go home to his wife, you might he surprised by what's possible in this place." And then he walked away, quickly replaced by Zeller.

“What are we doing here, Captain?” Zeller was fraying, on edge, and when Jack turned he saw that much of the rest of the crew had gathered in the waist, looking to Jack with that same fragile look.

Jack drew in a breath, clapped Zeller on the shoulder and stepped to the quarterdeck rail. He looked at the dozens of expectant faces below. “My friends,” he said, iron in a voice pitched to carry over hurricane or battle. He fancied he could hear his words bouncing back from the mountains in mocking lilt. “My friends, we are in a strange place and we have seen strange things and we will we see stranger still before we are done. But never doubt why we do these things! We are the hunters! We have scoured these seas clean of villainy and now there is one last monster for us to slay. We will strike him where he did not expect it and we will force him to come to us on our terms. And then my friends, my brave Bellas, we will see the *Chesapeake Ripper* burned and sunk and we will drag her vile captain back to Port Royal and then... and then we will have justice at the end of the rope. Because no matter what tricks, what evil that Hannibal Lecter drags before us we must always remember that we are righteous!”

The crew broke into cheers, stomping their feet and filling the desert with defiance, just for a moment. Jack turned to Zeller. “Mr. Zeller, get this deck squared away and all made ready. After that you may send the crew to their dinner. A hot one, if the stoves are still lit. Tell Mr. Price I want a full accounting of our supplies and stores. We must be prepared for however long we remain in this place.” Zeller straightened and snapped a salute. Jack returned it and said, “Carry on, Mr. Zeller. I will be in my cabin if I am needed.”

His heart thudding in his chest, Jack turned and walked down the steps to his cabin. He sat at his desk for a moment and then, driven by some instinct he opened his sea chest and dug down until he found a wax-wrapped rectangle. Gently, reverently, he lifted it out and brushed away the dust. The waxed paper crackled stiffly as he opened it. The portrait was beginning to show some age, but still she glowed, tall and lovely and strong, Bella. Oh, Bella. When would they be together again.

He found himself sometime later, groggy with sleep, lying across his bunk with a blanket across his knees and a cooling pot of coffee on his table next to a sheaf of paper covered in Price’s neat handwriting. The picture was hugged to his chest. He must have drifted off, and he tried to shake himself free of a dream of being inside a wooden box as great ravens scratched outside and rustled their wings-

Wait. The scraping continued even in waking and in the stupour of sleep it took him a moment to realize it was not claws, but... rocks! Rocks, scraping on the hull and the rushing of fast water past the hull. As if on cue came a pounding on his door and a voice calling him to the deck. He replaced the portrait in its wrapping, swallowed a cup of coffee in one and rushed to the quarterdeck.

The *Bella* was running now, thrusting forward with the current in a lively fashion. A horse excited to run after being held with a hard hand on the reins. The river had gone from a sluggish brown to white-capped and frothing as it hurtled over rapids. And the mountains... the mountains loomed impossibly near, impossibly tall. Their heads were crowned in boiling clouds and their steep flanks were the same grey-blue they’d been on the horizon. The ship’s

prow ground over a rock and slammed back into the water with a staggering impact. The forecastle was already soaked and the deck was becoming treacherously slick from the spray.

“Move us into the centre,” Jack shouted to the sailors struggling with the helm. He put his shoulder to the wheel and with great effort they forced the *Bella’s* nose back into the deepest part of the river and though they were not jarring across every rock in the river the ship began to gather speed, accelerating towards the shadowed canyon between the leviathan mountains ahead. “Lifelines,” Jack roared into the noise and wind, “and stand by the sweeps!” Zeller and Brown badgered and ordered and roared themselves as they herded the crew into readying the long, oar-like poles that could be used to fend the ship off of obstructions. Though, Jack thought grimly, at the speed they were going and with no way to slow themselves there was little chance they’d be able to prevent the hull being stoved in on some boulder.

“Maelstrom,” the lookout called. “Maelstrom ahead!”

Jack swore and swarmed up the rigging of the rear mast. With all the sails furled, he had a better view of his ship and their surroundings without climbing so high, though that small advantage did little to assuage his growing panic. Sure enough, where the river passed truly past the foot of the mountains it was split by a jumbled heap of rock and debris, perhaps the legacy of some avalanche. The river ran quicker to the right, fast and wild and frothed white rapids. To left it was deeper, calmer, but Jack could feel the *Bella* leaning to the right, straining to smash herself into the rapids. “Sweeps to starboard,” Jack bellowed as he shot back down to the quarterdeck, not looking to see if the order was obeyed. He rejoined the sailors at the helm and they put their straining backs and shoulders to it, fighting the hungry river to push the ship left. The sound of the river grew deafening, or perhaps that was the blood pounding in his ears. Then there was a last moment of agonizing effort, the grinding of wood and copper on stone, shouts and screams and then they were through. The ship was released from the river’s grasp so suddenly the wheel went over like a child’s top and Jack and the others were spilled to the deck.

Jack lay on the deck and gasped and contemplated the slate-grey sky as it narrowed between those olympean peaks. The ship ran easy and straight. She slowed. And then she stopped. Gently, evenly, stopped.

Jack sat up. Sailing ships, even one as relatively small as the *Quo* Bella, were massive things of wood and copper and flesh and were ever slaves to inertia. Sailing ships, especially ones up a river, did not just *stop*. But stop they had.

Most of the crew were lying or sitting on the deck in shock, exhaustion and relief at having survived, which is perhaps why Jack was the only one who saw the monster rise out of the water. The mouths came first, six eyeless, gnashing shark-mouths on stalks that rose so silently from the water that Jack was frozen in horror and denial. The rest of the body broke from the water, a massive torso matted with long black hair that grew from a head with a distressingly human face, save that instead of a mouth there were two more eyes, staring and bloodshot. The shark-mouthed stalks grew from the monster's shoulders where arms should be. The monster loomed over the ship and sailors began to scream and recoil. As the monster towered to its full height above the ship, four barking, tusked heads were visible at

its waist and below them the water was churned by long, coiling tails. It was these tentacles that held the ship in place.

The monster seemed to regard the ship for a moment, hanging silently above them. Those four, terrible eyes stared at Jack and he had a sharp, horrible flash of recognition before someone fired a musket and all hell broke loose. The musket ball simply reflected off the monster's scaly skin but it reared up and loosed a howl from its dog-heads. One of the arms lashed forward and the brave sailor was snatched up in the horrid mouth, ground between three rows of jagged teeth. There was no time or need for orders, just the frenzy of battle. Sailors seized muskets, boathooks, swords, even the long sweeps to fend off the monster. Screams and blood splashed across the deck as the stalks came down. One lunged for Zeller, who was tangled in a fallen line, but Price stepped in front of him and blasted a blunderbuss down its throat. Black ichor gouted and the stalk reared back. The dog-heads shrieked and the mouthless face thrashed back.

"It bleeds!" a sailor cried, "It bleeds and we can kill it!" The crew bellowed their defiance and charged again, but the stalks came down again and snatched two more away. Jack saw with horror that they were then passed into the dog-heads to be chewed and swallowed alive.

In the thick of the fighting was Brown, wielding a boarding pike like a man possessed. He was sheeted in the monster's black ichor and desperately trying to protect a fallen sailor at his feet. Jack drew his sword and half ran, half skidded across the deck to join him. Together they battered the stalk until its awful mouth drooled blood and teeth and seemed to hang limply.

An awful shrieking came from above, and Brown was suddenly showered with gore and greasy coils of intestines. Above, two stalks had seized a sailor out of the rigging and ripped him in two. The man continued, somehow, to wail until his ragged parts were fed to the monster's mouths. The sight demoralized the crew, and some began to drop their weapons and run for the hatches. The stalks quickly snatched up two as they did so. Jack could feel the tide turning against them. If the whole grew panicked, they were doomed. He turned to find Zeller, Brown, his officers, to give orders but it was a charnel madhouse on the deck, the light obscured by musket smoke that hung limply over the deck.

Then a cannon fired from below decks. The heavy ball crossed less than a metre of open air between the muzzle end and the monster's belly and it punched deep. Vile gore fountained from the wound and all the dog-mouths wailed in hideous harmony. Sailors dropped to their knees and covered their ears. A second cannon fired, this time smashing away the lower jaw of one of those dog-mouths. The monster recoiled, its tentacles splashing back into the water. A third cannon was run out, but this time the shot went wide, scraping a crease across the monster's belly but doing little harm. Still, it seemed the monster had had enough and began to pull away. A sailor, the same who had first cried havoc at the sight of its blood, cried victory and then agony as the last unwounded stalk seized her in its jaws.

Sailors, those who could still stand and had the will, crowded the rail to fire muskets after the monster as it sank into the water beneath the cliffside. A gun crew began to run out their cannon, but Jack stopped them. The *Bella* was free now and beginning to gather way. In a

moment they would be out of the monster's reach, and it seemed content to glare with its four eyes and nurse its wounds.

Jack dropped his sword from suddenly nerveless hands and leaned against a master, working to steady his breathing and slow his heart. Others did the same, or lay on the deck, or nursed their wounds. The ship's doctor had already come up on deck and was seeing to the wounded. Zeller and Price were organizing sailors into parties to sluice the deck clean and tend to the rigging. Brown had taken the wheel and was guiding the ship back into the main channel. Here, between the sheer mountainsides, the river ran wide, deep and easy. That left only...

"While we were taken up with Charybdis," Will Graham said from behind him, "and were expecting each moment to be our last, Scylla pounced down suddenly upon us and snatched up my six best men. I was looking at once after both ship and men, and in a moment I saw their hands and feet ever so high above me, struggling in the air as Scylla was carrying them off, and I heard them call out my name in one last despairing cry. Scylla did land these panting creatures on her rock and munch them up at the mouth of her den, while they screamed and stretched out their hands to me in their mortal agony."

Jack rounded on Will with fury on his face. "Yes, I remember *The Odyssey*, you bastard. You knew this was coming, and you did nothing."

"Didn't I? I told you this was your time to be like the great Odysseus. This place has recognized you, Jack, seen you as the captain. Now it moulds itself to you. Be grateful you were thinking of a story where the ship survives. Besides, if you do remember the story, do you know what comes next?"

Jack sighed. "The sirens?"

"The sirens."

Chapter End Notes

Scylla's description is based on one I found while researching her. Apparently she was a lot more delightfully weird before Homer. :D

Island of Healing

Chapter Summary

While Jack and Will navigate the desert otherworld, Bedelia attends a dinner party.

A plantation outside Willemstad, Curaçao, June 1736

The music floated through the night air, carried on sea breezes and laughter. It had rained that afternoon, and so the air was clean-smelling and relieved of the normal summer humidity. The great landhuis at the heart of the plantation was a beacon of light and sound, the doors and windows all thrown open to the night air and letting out the tinkle and chatter of a dinner party. In the middle distance someone was singing in the local slave pidgin, and since the landhuis was far enough from the docks and harbour of Willemstad to avoid – though perhaps not forget – the stench of the slave ships at anchor and the wretched enclosures of the market one could find the song pleasant.

Inside, white faces turned red by sun and wine laughed and talked and schemed and drank and were waited on by slaves they affected not to see. Bedelia watched them, imagined how they imagined they were served by not by people but by automatons, perhaps, or even the winds themselves as though they were in a fairy story. She did not think they would enjoy meeting the true aos sí as she knew them. She thought of calling some forth to curdle drinks and rot food inside bellies, but even as she contemplated it, Hannibal's hand settled onto hers and she felt chains tighten around her. He was chewing, and gave her an amused, even kind smile. They were seated next to each other, Hannibal beside the plantation owner, Willem van Tassel and beside Bedelia a highly unpleasant man named Baltus. In truth the fae were hardly needed to curdle anything with Baltus around. He had gotten steadily drunker as the night wore on, and more obvious about staring down the front of Bedelia's dress. After the last course had been cleared he'd started groping the slave girls as they passed by and muttering hideously lecherous comments that had begun to increase in volume with each glass of wine. The others all appeared to be doing their best to ignore Baltus, so she assumed this was a regular state of affairs for him.

Then he put his sweaty paw on her knee under the table and her reaction must have been plain enough because the lady of the house coughed pointedly to her husband. Hannibal moved first, however. He still had that amused but not mocking smile on as he dabbed his mouth with his napkin, rose smoothly as though he were simply leaving for the bathroom, and then drove his table knife directly into Baltus's larynx with enough force that Bedelia clearly heard it scrape against bone.

There was a moment of stunned, crystalline silence as everyone gaped at the choking Baltus before someone screamed and it was a stampede of over-dressed, overfed party guests scrambling and clawing at each other to flee the room, the house, out into the night.

Hannibal straightened his jacket, pinched out the creases in his trousers, and sat at the head of the chair. He was the picture of calm, genteel elegance as he poured himself a glass of wine and sipped it with evident appreciation. Baltus, meanwhile, gargled and burbled around the knife in his airway.

“That seemed rash,” Bedelia remarked with a raised eyebrow. “It won’t be long before some of them find guns and courage.”

Hannibal shrugged with his mouth. “I am not overly concerned with their delusions of courage. And he was being intolerably crass. Ruining an otherwise excellent dinner.”

Bedelia studied him for a moment, lips pursed and eyebrow still raised. “Open murder seems to have cut the dinner shorter much quicker than a drunk with wandering hands. You’re bored, aren’t you? This little charade, Doctor and Señora Fel touring the Spanish Main, you’ve lost your taste for it.”

“Baltus there is the tasteless one, and I suspect will also be untasted.” Baltus slumped sideways, chest heaving, and began to hiccup wet, hacking bubbles of blood. Hannibal gestures to him. “Would you mind, terribly?”

Bedelia sighed, gripped the knife hilt and yanked. It was wedged tight in Baltus’s spine and she succeeded only in flopping him forward on the table and evoking a bubbling moan. She frowned, used both hands and torqued the knife sideways. It came free and tore his jugular out. Blood gouted out in an arc that cleared the width of the table and splattered the remains of the meal. Baltus finally collapsed to the floor and began the very swift process of bleeding to death.

Bedelia dropped the knife to the floor and used a napkin to rub at a spot of blood on her dress. When she looked up, Hannibal was smiling at her and inclined his glass towards her as though in a toast. “You haven’t lost your touch,” he said.

She sat next to him, where she could keep her shoes out of the expanding puddle of gore. She surveyed the table blood-spattered table and sighed. “You couldn’t have waited until after dinner to kill him?"

Hannibal affected an air of surprise. “I didn’t kill him. That was all your doing, my dear.”

“You stabbed him in the neck.”

“Only because you wanted me to.”

“I said no such-“

“Didn’t you imagine it though, as he breathed on you and stared at you, didn’t you imagine him lying on floor like that? He died because you wanted him to.”

Bedelia snorted. “So you have no free will of your own?”

“We are all arrows fired from the bow of our own natures. You knew that ending his life is an inevitable consequence of my nature if he continued to act the boor. And yet you did nothing

to stop it. You could have dissuaded him, or imposed on the rules of hospitality to have our good hosts remove him, but instead you simply registered your discomfort until what happened happened and it was by your own design that it did happen."

Bedelia rolled her eyes and sipped at her wine. "Sounds to me like you're using the words of dead Greeks to disclaim responsibility for your own actions."

"Not at all. I am what I am and I do what I do. I do not deny myself the truth of myself. Why do you? You're a killer, just as much as I am. You know it to be true. It is true that you killed crass Baltus here, just as it's true that you killed that boy in Veracruz. Oh, yes, I know all about that. You lied to him, you manipulated him, and then you put him in a position where he would die. You killed him as surely as if you'd held the knife yourself." He paused, and Bedelia was sure he could hear her heart hammering in her chest. Then he smiled. "I am almost proud. I knew Will would find a way around the first gate, but I never imagined you would be the one to hand him the key."

Bedelia raised her chin defiantly. "You've sown the seeds of your own undoing," she said, but Hannibal sinply smiled again and sipped his wine, and she had a sudden horrified moment of clarity. "You want Will to breach your palace."

"Of course!" Hannibal said, with air of one finally able to share an exciting tidbit. "I am well aware of where Will is, what he is doing. How could I not? We are bound, he and I."

"Why?" Bedelia asked. "What do you gain from all this? Is this just entertainment for you?"

"Oh, you should know better, Bedelia. We are alike, we are things that stand apart, you and I. You see, I realized that I would never be able to free Will, no matter how much we shared. When he survived our parting, when he struggled through blood and darkness to find a way back to me, when the force of his desire created a new psychopomp from his friend's soul when she should have been untethered, that's when I realized the truth: Will is already free, he just doesn't understand it yet. But the things he will have to do to claim what he thinks he wants, to rescue the one I took from him... he will see, in the end, that we are alike. The same. We will see each other fully, completely."

"Aren't you forgetting someone? Someone who is not like you and can never be?"

Hannibal smiled. No, that wasn't right. He showed all his teeth, but there wasn't even the fiction of warmth. "You mean Jack Crawford? The seeker of beauty? He doesn't see Will, not truly. He doesn't know the truth of Will, not like I do. Jack thinks in straight lines, the connections between points. But most of all, he is true to himself. So he will face a test of self inside my palace. If Jack fails, then Will can take what he seeks in the palace and he will come to me. If Jack remains true, then Will has no choice. Either he will destroy Jack, or he will destroy himself.

"And now, my dear, we should leave this place. Have you ever been to Maracaibo?"

The Lady of the Lake

Chapter Summary

With their destination almost in reach, the crew of the Quo Bella must cross the lake of sirens, and test their resolve.

The Mountains of Somewhere Else, June 1736

The river was wide here, a few hundred feet from rocky shore to rocky shore, and it ran deep and steady. There was little to do but be carried along by the current. There were no sails to set or trim, no pumps to man, no rigging to haul. The wheel needed only the lightest touch to keep the *Quo Bella* true. The crew slept and ate and spoke in low voices. Brown and Zeller had shifts repairing the damage done by the monster and cleaning and making ready the main guns, but there was only so much work that could be made. The crew was nervous, on edge. There were no songs or laughter, no skylarking youngsters or surreptitious drinking. Brown had suggested gunnery practice, but Zeller had argued that they needed to conserve as much powder as they could, there being nowhere to resupply in this reality, and Jack had agreed. The main reason, one they all agreed with but left unspoken, was that no one wanted to see what might be awoken by the sound of cannonfire echoing through the mountains.

The mountains. Jack was standing at the edge of the quarterdeck, spine straight and hands clasped at the small of his back, staring up at those mountains. They were... wrong. They rose sheerly from the water without variations or rocky debris or trees or folds, as sharp and sheer as knives or the pointed caricatures of a child's drawing. And they were a mottled brown and purple, not the colour of dirt and soil at all. It was as though they were distant despite being so close he could almost touch them. They looked like mountains do as they look on the horizon. Jack shivered. Perhaps they were, just not for him. Perhaps in this place these mountains had no respect for his perspective and were instead as some other saw them from some distant place. He shivered and turned away from the peaks and looked up at the sky. And saw Will Graham.

Will was perched at the very peak of the mainmast, his curly hair and worn clothing rippling in the breeze. The days at sea had darkened the prison pallor to a sailor's tan, and he swayed easily with the gentle motion of the ship like he was as much a part of it as the rigging. He was beautiful, Jack realized, in the way that a stag in the summer forest is beautiful. Graceful, lithe, but dangerous. Wolves know the wisdom of cunning, of calculation. But a stag must either flee or kill, and his weapons are terrible. Brown sat in the crosstrees just below Will, so still and shadowed Jack didn't see him until he moved to hand Will a waterskin. Will drank, and Brown watched him drink with obvious devotion. Then Brown looked down abruptly, meeting Jack's eyes. He said something to Will, something Jack couldn't hear. Will turned and looked and saw Jack and gave a small nod, then held up a finger as if to say, "Just a moment." Will said another word to Brown, whispering so close their foreheads touched.

Then he gripped a stay and slid down to the quarterdeck while Brown took the more sedate path down to the waist deck. “There’s trouble ahead, Jack,” Will said without preamble.

Jack sighed. “Is that a general observation, or did you have some specific trouble in mind.”

Will flashed a grin. “Both. But mostly the latter. We’re approaching a lake, and the current won’t be enough to carry us across. We’ll need to set some sails.” The only thing about that that troubled Jack was the reminder that the river’s current was flowing backwards, into the mountains instead of out of them. “The problem,” Will continued over Jack’s internal monologue, “is that it’s the lake of the sirens.”

“Sirens,” Jack said flatly. “I suppose we’ll need to put wax in our ears.”

“Unless you’d rather be tied to the mast.”

“Damn you,” Jack said suddenly, anger bubbling to the surface. “Why are we talking about this? If this place is creating the dangers from my thoughts, why are you speaking of sirens and monsters? Is this a game to you? My sailors are *dying*.”

“Oh, nothing is being created, Jack, not even for you. Monsters exist whether you think of them or not. I’m giving you a framework, a way to construct them in your mind that let’s you – and all of us – get through this. You know *The Odyssey*, you know how Odysseus prevails. Better that we face Scylla and the sirens than let them form themselves.”

Jack stared at Will for a long time, hating that the other man was making sense. None of this made sense, not this place, these monsters, and especially not Hannibal Lecter. And yet it was as though Jack had been looking through a telescope with a missing lens. He had been seeing only the shape of things, but now he could see the truth in terrible clarity. “So what do we do? Fill the crew’s ears with wax and sail across?”

“More or less. We should seal all the gunports, and lock most of the crew belowdecks. Keep twenty or so up here, enough to handle the sails and to repel... boarders. Anyone who stays on deck will need the wax, and you should pick the steadiest, the ones who have little in life outside their devotion to ship and crew.”

“I thought the sirens preyed on lustful men.”

“That is how they catch many, yes. But what they actually use is longing. Anyone who longs for what they cannot have or cannot pursue, they are the ones who are caught by the sirens. It’s not chastity that will save you, it’s clarity.”

Zeller and Price were the most obvious choices. Everything they wanted was each other, Jack had no doubt of that. Brown volunteered and Jack accepted, as much to see of Brown’s devotion to Will was as complete as it seemed. Many others volunteered, once he had explained to the crew what was going to happen. The river was broadening by the time preparations were complete. Every sailor remaining on deck was tied fast to life lines, whether they in the rigging or on deck. They rigged boarding nets, as much to try and catch anyone who went overboard as to stop things from climbing up. Pikes, cutlasses and muskets were issued and arranged by the rails. They were as prepared as they could be. Ironically, the

thing that concerned Jack the least was his crew's ability to coordinate with their ears blocked up. It was no different than the heat and thunder of battle or the rage of a tropical storm, with the benefit of smooth sailing and no-one firing red-hot cannonballs into the hull.

Before he'd stopped up his own ears, Jack had noticed Will hadn't deafened himself. "They have nothing they can tempt me with," Will had said. "I know exactly what I want and where it is."

Jack had snorted. "Even Odysseus wasn't that sure of himself."

"Oh, but he was. Odysseus knew fully that he would succumb to the sirens. That's why he tied himself to the mast and ordered his crew to ignore him no matter what. He had perfect clarity of self, just not of purpose."

"I never liked Odysseus, really. Too changeable, too casual with the lives of his crew."

"That's very Roman of you Jack. They didn't like him, either. They venerated Aeneas for his honour and his clarity of purpose, nevermind what he did to Dido. I guess lying is only bad if you do it to men. That always felt childish to me. They were so bad at guile they built their whole society around shaming it. Which just meant that the Romans who could think like Odysseus instead of Aeneas ended up on top."

The lake was wide and still, and as the *Quo Bella* sailed out on to it Jack had a palpable feeling of relief. He hadn't realized how much the mountains had been pressing in on him. He could see in the suddenly loose postures of the crew that they felt similar. Only Will, standing on the bowsprit and staring down at the water, remained tense.

They saw the lights first. The lake water was cloudy, powder blue, and they couldn't see more than a few feet down, so they saw the lights first. Blue-green glows swelling up through the water and circling around the ship. One, then five, then a dozen, then too many to properly track. Behind the lights, in the water's murk, they began to see shapes. Long, powerful, aqualine shapes that wove and loomed began remained indistinct. They wave they moved in interweaving curves was entrancing, like the Irish knotwork he had seen in art and garments and even tattoos like the ones his former crewman O'Flaherty had had on her face before she died and what a shame that had been because she had had a fine voice and a better fiddle and no one had been as able to keep spirits up like she had and what a shame they'd never-

Jack shook it off, abruptly aware he was leaning dangerously far over the rail. A sickly feeling grew in his belly as he saw that many of his crew were doing the same. At the bow, Price shook Zeller out of the hypnosis and together they roused the sailors still fixated. All except one. Despite being roughly shaken, the sailor remained transfixed and began making vague pawing motions towards the water until he leaned too far and toppled over the rail. He was caught by the boarding next, and the impact seemed to awaken him. Jack and the others had a moment to see the panic bloom in the sailor's eyes before the net gave way under his weight and he plunged into the water. A huge, dark shape passed over where he had fallen in and he was gone without a trace.

The crew began backing away from the rail. The sailors in the rigging were aiming muskets down into the water. Everything was breathlessly still for a moment. Then the singing began. At first it was just an itch, a pressure on Jack's ears. He began to feel a strange disassociation, and noted distantly that someone was hammering from below at the chained-down hatch. The pressure grew and grew until it ached, and Jack was certain he only had to unstop his ears to make the pain stop. He thought of the bodies on the Isla de Sacrificios, of Beverly, of the horrors he'd seen in the *Ripper's* wake, and most of all he thought of Bella who was lost to him. The pressure began to ease with sullen slowness, and Jack felt his head clearing.

Price and Zeller, apparently unaffected as badly as the others, were moving through the sailors on deck, steadying them as they could. Brown was aloft, doing similar. Will was still on the bowsprit, looking forwards. Jack followed his gaze and realized they were over halfway across the lake. Surely it wouldn't be long now.

The sirens realized that, too. The pressure increased again, but it felt more distant this time, like a song leaking through stone walls. Not for everyone, though. One sailor swayed on his feet like a drunk, weeping openly, then abruptly began clawing at his ears. Others tried to hold him back, but he threw them off with flailing fists. His ears and face were bleeding by the time the wax was out of his ears, but the beatific smile he smiled felt no pain. Laughing, arms wide, the sailor threw himself over the side of the ship. He didn't even hit the water.

The siren that lunged up to catch the sailor in its terrible jaws reminded Jack of a blackfish, but above that gaping maw where an orca's nose would be there grew a torso, sleek and glistening with an eyeless face and a soft, cruel mouth. The siren remained out of the water, the eyeless face scanning the entire crew with slow deliberation. And then the whale-mouth closed, rending the screaming sailor apart in a welter of blood. The siren laughed to see them recoil, and that laughter brought forth in Jack an anger so terrible it melted away the lassitude in his mind and replaced it with terrible purpose. He raised his pistol and fired. The ball struck the siren exactly where its eyes should be, punching a crater where there should have been a socket. The siren wailed and thrashed, then splashed back into the water.

The blood-stained water splashed, then stilled until only then passage of the *Quo Bella* disturbed it. Was that it? Were they free?

Sirens burst from the water all around them, standing taller than the decks with mouths agape in song. Sailors fell to their knees. One lost her footing and tumbled from the rigging, her lifeline wrapped around her neck. She died reaching piteously for a siren. Lead by Jack and Zeller and Price and Brown, most of the sailors fought back despite the aching pain pushing through the wax in their ears. Price and Zeller manned a swivel gun that nearly ripped a siren in two with grapeshot. Brown and others, mostly the so-called wolf pack, speared another with boat hooks and hauled it partially onto the deck where they hacked it apart like maddened whalers. One sailor simply lay on the deck, blood leaking from his nose despite no evident injury.

Still, Will Graham stood calmly on the bowsprit. A siren, the one Jack had shot, suddenly reared up behind Will. Before Jack could shout a warning, the siren opened its mouth and sang. It was a different song than before, even through plugged ears. The fighting stopped as

the song floated over the lake, slow and throbbing. Sailors fell to their knees, weeping without knowing why. The other sirens pulled back from the ship, swaying with the song. Jack blinked and blinked again because the siren was changing, becoming indistinct like the horizon over hot earth. Then, as the song vibrated in Jack's very bones so that it was felt more than heard, the siren became *her*. She stood there, tall and strong, regal and beautiful, her long curling hair tugged by the breeze, her smile knowing and loving. He whispered her name without knowing, and the weapons fell from his nerveless fingers and he was walking to her, stumbling on the flat deck like a landsman. It could not be. It couldn't. The song was in his heart now, vibrating on a register nearly too low for even unplugged ears to hear, and it pulled him.

Will stood beside her, and he seemed to be speaking. But so was she. But Jack couldn't hear her. He needed to hear her. He scraped at his ears, drawing blood, but the stubborn wax wouldn't come out. He *needed* to hear.

The musket blast was distant, but Jack felt it pass by his head, felt a scrap of burning cartridge paper land on his shoulder like a wasp. The ball struck Bella in her right eye, throwing her head back. Jack screamed.

The song stuttered, then stopped. Jack felt something inside him deflate like a burst balloon, and he stumbled to the deck. The siren was screaming silently and pawing at the two oozing holes in its face. With one last, hateful spit, it sank into the lake and disappeared. The other sirens followed, and they were alone.

Jack turned and saw Zeller holding a smoking musket. He nodded in weary gratitude and Zeller nodded back. The sailors began pulling the wax from their ears and someone unchained the hatch to let the others on deck.

Will dropped off the bowsprit and crossed to Brown. They touched foreheads, a quiet embrace before the boatswain joined Zeller in getting the crew and the deck back in order. The *Quo Bella* was approaching the river mouth on the far side of the lake. Soon they would be back in the mountains.

Jack sat on the deck and saw little of it. He had nearly failed, nearly lost his sense of purpose. That couldn't happen. Will crouched down next to Jack, and he offered a hand up. Jack pushed it away and stood on his own. "That's your idea of an apology, Graham?" Jack asked roughly.

Will shrugged and didn't seem bothered by Jack's tone. "I had to see what you would do."

"You mean you wanted to see what would happen," Jack snapped. "Maybe you're not that different from him after all."

Will turned away and looked back over the lake. "Probably. He picked me for a reason. But remember I'm the one leading you to Hannibal, to his sanctum."

"And why is that? No one in Port Royal knew who you were. You could have lied your way out of that prison and disappeared. Or maybe if Hannibal cares for you as much as you say, you could get close enough to put a knife in him."

Will's expression hardened. "It's not that simple, Jack. He took something from me, and I can't get it back on my own."

"And this... thing, it's on his ship?"

Will smiled bitterly. "He keeps it close to his heart, yes."

A shout from aloft drew their attention. They were rounding the first bend in the river and coming into view on the mountainside ahead was a vast and impossible palace. It seemed to have no plan or design but had grown like a living thing from a central root. Light streamed from its windows, and the great cathedral doors at its front stood open and inviting. The river passed below it, amidst a conifer forest that wrapped around the palace like a blanket.

They had arrived at the palace of Hannibal Lecter.

A Full Moon Rises

Chapter Summary

They have reached the palace. What lurks within and without.

The Memory Palace of Hannibal Lecter, June 1736

They moored the *Quo Bella* at a wharf on the riverbank with unlikely ease. The river seemed to push the ship into position and to hold it there while they made the lines fast. The forest, tall pines that deeply shadowed the space between them, seemed to be closer to the bank every time Jack looked up. Above, looming on the hillside, sprawled the palace. Jack could see the way it had grown almost organically, how disparate architectural styles merged into each other in improbable and yet not displeasing ways. Still the great cathedral doors yawned open, spilling out soft light into the darkening sky.

Neither the sun nor the moon had been visible during the trip up-river, nor had the light ever changed from a sourceless noonday brightness. And yet now the sky was purpling and an impossibly large moon was rising behind the mountains. Jack couldn't help but connect this to their arrival. It was unsettling, and Jack had heard a few of the crew whispering admonishments against ill omens. Will Graham had watched the moonrise with an air of satisfaction, which was almost as troubling.

The moonlight was bright but hard-edged, brilliantly illuminating what it touched yet deepening shadows into impenetrability. Jack, accompanied by Will, Zeller and a few sailors, set off into the forest carrying lanterns, muskets, and cutlasses. The forest was thick but relatively clear of underbrush so they made good time. The hill was deceptively steep and they were all sucking wind by the time they crested the rise and sighted the palace.

Jack leaned against a tree and caught his breath, the others doing likewise, and considered the palace. This close, the simple unreality of it was even more stark. Wings merged into each other at odd angles, architectural features collided, and parts were utterly decrepit while others could have been built yesterday. Some windows were lit, others shuttered or boarded or gaping holes like missing teeth. And the doors... they were massive arched doors. It was hard to make out the details from this distance, but Jack had the impression of faces and limbs and torsos in bronze profusion. A shadow moved across the light between them. Someone was inside.

"Your guide is waiting for you," Will said quietly. "She has the final key you will need,"

"You're not coming in?"

“I can’t,” Will said, and looked pained. “I have been forbidden the garden, Jack. I can never taste its wonders again. But maybe you can bring forth the apple, Jack.”

“You mean the skull.”

Will smiled thinly, looking at Jack for the first time. Will’s face was half in shadow, so his remaining eye was only a glint while the puckered socket of his ruined eye was plain to see. Jack was reminded of the siren, with the bullet holes in its face where eyes should have been, and he shivered. “Of course the skull.” Will lapsed into silence and Jack turned to go, but Will put a hand on his shoulder. “Hannibal doesn’t lie. That’s not how he seduces you. He shows you truth. Or his truth, and he makes you accept it as your own truth. You’re going to see things in there, Jack. And they will be real.”

Down on the ship, Price and Brown were standing watch. Which is to say, Price was standing on the quarterdeck scanning the hillside with a telescope, hoping to catch a glimpse of the shore party, and Brown was sneaking up behind him with a belaying pin held like a club. There was a sharp crack, a noise of pain, and the sound of a body falling.

Jack stepped through the doors. On the outside, they bore bronze sculptures, bas-relief depictions of human figures in torment, plunging ever deeper into a yawning abyss. Each figure was only as long as Jack’s hand, and yet the detail on their faces, their hands, was exquisite. And awful. There were hundreds of figures on the twelve-foot-high sculptures and each was unique. It was a monument to suffering, to the fall of humanity, or perhaps the descent of the fallen angels, sculpted by an imagination as haunted as it was talented.

Inside, the foyer of the palace was a cathedral, a great smoky Catholic edifice thick with the smell of centuries of candles and incense. Jack had been half expecting inverted crosses or perversions or baptismal fonts filled with blood, but perhaps that would have been *inelegant*. The walls and chapels were dedicated to the martyrdom of the saints and that was unsettling enough. In the centre of the floor before Jack was a mosaic, a huge human skull with empty sockets and a welcoming grin. A reminder of mortality.

Beverly rose from the pew where she had been waiting, folded her wings behind her, and crossed to Jack. He could see the light filtering through the places where her body had been sliced apart. She was like a marionette, a collection of disparate pieces animated together without being a whole. In her left hand she held an orb that was lit from within by a soft, golden radiance. “Hello, Jack,” she said. “I’ve been waiting for you. It’s good to see you.”

“You’re the guide, then?”

“Yes. And no. I can unlock doors, but I can’t tell you where they lead.”

“That’s cryptic,” Jack said, trying a small smile.

“Yes,” Beverley said, with the sly half-smile Jack remembered. “There are limits to what I can do, here in this place.”

By some unspoken impulse, they turned and began to walk towards the head of the church. They walked in silence, in lockstep, like they had as captain and first mate. Jack looked into the chapels as they passed, at the martyred saints. There was St. Sebastian tied naked and beautiful to a column, his firmly muscled flesh penetrated again and again by the thick shafts of Roman arrows, his face upturned to the heavens, his eyes rolling back not in agony but in rapturous ecstasy as the holy spirit entered him, filled him. The art was of staggering genius, every pore on the saint’s perfect skin visible, every curl of his luxurious brown hair perfectly rendered. Jack stopped abruptly. It wasn’t St. Sebastian. It was *Will Graham*. They were *all* Will. There he was as St. Justus, carrying his own head in his hands with an expression of serene acceptance. And there, as Saint Bartholomew, skinned with every gleaming muscle exposed and carrying his own skin draped over one arm like a cloak, reaching toward the heavens. And above them all, a monumental stained glass of Will with his eyes closed as though in sleep and his arms crossed over his chest and great prismatic wings of shards and shards of multicoloured glass that danced and seemed to flutter in the light of the rising moon. This wasn’t just a church, Jack realized. It was a shrine. And it was dedicated to Will Graham.

There was a door leading off the nave, oak and heavy with age, the door that in a real cathedral would have connected to the rectory. Instead, it opened onto a large, bright hall lined with mirrors of innumerable sizes, shapes and qualities. Some were little better than scraps of polished silver or tin, and others massive gilt-framed things that must have cost huge sums. Jack stopped looking into them after long. They showed his reflection, but it was always subtly disturbing, as though it were showing a face that looked almost but not quite exactly like him. And there were things scurrying around the edges of the reflections. Still, they bounced the moonlight that entered through the great skylights and lit up the room wonderfully. Of course Jack’s mental map, crudely formed from studying the exterior, insisted they were buried by many stories of palace and far from the reach of the moon. The corridor was long and echoing and it was difficult distance to the far end or back the way they came. They passed many doors, of different makes and sizes and ages. Sometimes Jack swore he could hear things or voices from behind the doors, present but impossible to discern. Beverly walked past them all without so much as a sideways glance and so Jack did his best to ignore them.

Until they reached the door he couldn’t walk past.

It was the smell that did it. Bella had always worn a particular perfume and even if perhaps she hadn’t been the only one to wear it, the smell of it was lodged in Jack’s soul like a splinter and now it reached out from a low wooden door and snared Jack like a lasso. He didn’t even stop to think, he just lunged for the door and barged through.

And stepped onto the deck of a ship in a gale. The wind and the wet, pitching deck nearly sent him tumbling to his feet save for the instincts of a lifetime at sea. He clutched the lifeline strung along the outer railing of the ship and paused a moment to take stock of his rash action. The door he had come the through had closed, and Jack was dreadfully certain that if he were to open it he would find the interior of the ship and not an airy corridor of

mirrors and moonlight. He was leaning against the wall of the quarterdeck, looking forward along the bow. It was a largish ship with the lean lines of a man-of-war.

The ship crested a wave, the bow slamming against the wave and soaking the deck. Jack gasped as the icy chill drove into his bones.

Then, voices above him. He looked up to see two cloak-laden figures looking over the starboard rail and talking in shouts he couldn't make out over the noise of the storm. They were searching for something, land perhaps. A gust of wind came whipping across the deck and blew back the hood of the taller figure, and Jack suddenly found himself looking into the face of Will Graham.

On the *Quo Bella*, the ship was dark. The brilliant moon was hidden behind clouds. The remaining watch was quickly overpowered by Brown and the wolf pack. Most were silenced easily, bound and gagged and left in the croft under the forecastle. One, more alert than his fellows, sought to raise alarm and had his throat cut. The river accepted his body hungrily. Then they chained down the hatches and slipped silently off the ship and entered the dark forest.

Jack's heart pounded in his chest and he remained frozen in place. It was Will Graham, but younger, with both eyes still in his head. His brown hair was plastered to his head and he moved more easily, with confidence and not the closed-down sidle of a hungry dog. Still, in the unsteady light Jack could see something haunted lurking behind Will's eyes. Will had one arm protectively draped across his companion's and was pointing across the heaving seas. Jack looked where Will pointed, and there, illuminated by a bolt of lightning, was a ship.

Her ship.

The ship she had set out on from New Orleans all those years ago, the ship that vanished with all hands under a sudden, improbable storm. This storm. Jack couldn't breath. His gorge rose and the deck seemed to spin beneath his feet. It hadn't been an accident, a freak of the capricious sea. If Will Graham was here, then this could only be... he reeled back from the idea. This was the *Chesapeake Ripper*, and Hannibal Lecter had taken Bella from him.

He heard a sound, felt it almost, like the beating of a great drum or perhaps a heart. It travelled up his feet through the deck and into his bones. The ship knew him, welcomed him, bid him to join it. They would sail the seas, no masters but the wind and tide. He had only step into the great cabin so close by.

Above him, he heard Will Graham speak, say a name. Abigail. He was telling her to look, and there was such love in his voice that it seemed to make the call of the ship grow quiet. Jack looked up, directly into the face of Abigail. She had wide, frightened eyes in a pale oval face, and she lifted one finger to her lips to warn Jack before turning her attention to Will.

Jack looked back to Bella's ship, too, in time to see a bolt strike the foremast and bring the topsail and all its rigged and spars tumbling to the deck in a writhing mass. Sailors died in that tangle, Jack knew, they were crushed and strangled and smothered and pulled apart and dragged into the sea, but from here it was as remote and unreal as a dream. Jack could see sailors boiling over the wreckage, desperately trying to cut away the dragging spars and sailcloth before it caused the ship to broach and sink. Was that it? Was that how she died? Dragged beneath the sea in a sudden terrifying moment. Or had she perhaps already died of cold, or shock, or a fall?

One figure on that ship didn't move. It was her. Bella stood there, tall and calm at the rail, looking back to him. He was sure that just as he knew she was there, so she knew of him. Tears made the salt and rain on his face all the more bitter. He stretched out a hand as though he could reach across the gulf and storm and hold her one last time.

And then Bella reached back, grasped his hand and pulled him aboard with her. He simply stepped from one ship to the other as though they were floating next to each other on the calmest bay and not separated by hundreds of feet of thrashing storm. They stood there, holding each other's hands like they had as they said their wedding vows, melting into each other's eyes.

Finally, Jack spoke. "This isn't real," he whispered, "it can't be."

She smiled at him, that gentle, knowing smile. "It is. I'm here, and so are you." She squeezed his hand. "You can't come with me this time. Not this way."

Jack shook his head. "No, I won't leave you. I love you."

"And I love you. But you're not leaving me, you're just... taking the long way around. We will see each other again under the full moon."

The sailors forward had failed to cut away the dragging remains of mast and sail, and the ship was beginning to turn side-on to the storm. A monster wave was rising up to meet them. It was death, a foam-shot wall of inexorable death. Sailors were praying, or screaming. Many below had already drunk themselves insensible. One leapt overboard. One shot himself. Jack and Bella stood, arms around each other, as that monstrous wave lifted the ship and crushed it. Jack felt a moment of incredible pressure and then a cold like he had never known. His vision began to tunnel until all he could see was her face. She whispered to him, but the roaring in his ears stole it away. Then, darkness.

In the forest, Brown paused. They were in a rare break in the forest cover, and the vast, glowing moon was clearing the horizon. The other sailors, the so-called wolf pack that had become Will Graham's adherents, the ones who had been marked by a strange ritual in the jungle outside Maracaibo, the ones who had eaten the flesh and drunk the blood of a man, they saw the moon and were transfixed. It called to them, that pale and razor-edged light, spoke to something Will Graham had planted in their hearts. And it began to change them.

Michael Brown watched in awed wonder as the sailors buckled and writhed in agony and ecstasy. Their flesh and bones warped and melted and flowed into new forms. Hands became paws, teeth became fangs. A pack of wolves, unnaturally formed and misproportioned. Brown felt tears of joy trickle down his cheeks. This, this was the wonder he had been promised. He felt something moving inside his chest, felt his bones aching to warp and pop into other forms, but he mastered it, held it back. It was not yet time for his apotheosis.

One of the wolves, a rangy beast who had once been a gunner, growled and sniffed the air. She had the scent of Zeller and the shore party up ahead and soon the rest of the pack had it, too. They growled and drooled and pawed at the dirt and shook out their hackles. They were beautiful. Led by Brown, they slipped through the shadowed forest.

Heartaches and Revelations

Chapter Summary

Jack moves deeper into the Memory Palace, uncovering more troubling secrets. Will's plan begins to unfold in blood and pain.

The Memory Palace of Hannibal Lecter, June 1736

Jack dropped to all fours and heaved and hacked out sea water, wracked with vomiting and sobbing and hate. The briny mess spread across the polished wooden floor and pooled against the mirrors and doors and glistened in the moonlight. A soggy, half-digested chunk of ship's biscuit, the remains of a breakfast he couldn't remember, floated in the spew. Jack watched it float along with a detached curiousity. He knew he was disassociating from what he'd just seen, but still couldn't bring himself to snap out of it. Eventually there was nothing left in his belly and his breathing cleared. He sat back, slumping against a mirror that creaked under his weight and started to whisper in his ear. It was a huge, gold-framed thing edged with arabesques and it whispered in a language he couldn't understand, fortunately. He looked up and saw Beverly looking down at him with an expression of distant, tolerant sympathy. The moon was directly behind her, and again Jack saw how the light passed through her dismembered body like an ill-fitted fence.

"Sorry, Jack," she said as she offered him a hand up. "I'm not allowed to tell you what's behind any door but the one you're meant to take."

"So was that... real?"

"As real as memory. And as accurate."

"So it's true. He killed her. And Will Graham watched him do it."

"That is a truth, yes."

Jack looked at her sharply. "What does that mean?"

"Will did watch her die. But so did you."

"But I wasn't there. He was."

Beverly said nothing, just tapped one booted toe in the pool of seawater and vomit. When Jack didn't respond, she sighed, and said, "You're missing the point, Jack. Hannibal created that door just for you, because he knew that one day you might find this place. He did it to show you a version of the truth because he wants to know what you'll do. But he also showed you more than he had to because he is taunting you."

Jack was silent a long moment before it dawned on him. “The girl. The one with Will. She saw me, warned me to be silent. Who is she?”

“Abigail. Abigail Hobbs.”

It took Jack a moment to make the connection. “Hobbs. As in Garret Jacob Hobbs?”

“Yes. She is the daughter of the pirate whose death made you famous. Except you didn’t kill him, did you?”

Jack looked at her sharply. “No. We didn’t. He and all his crew were dead when we got there. Hannibal did that, you showed it to me. So, she was what they took from Hobbs?”

“Yes. Among other things, less important things.”

Jack frowned in thought. Their footsteps echoed down the long hallway, distracting him, tempting him to look at the mirrors and listening to what they had to say. They were still seemingly in the middle of that impossible hallway, neither approaching the end nor getting further from the beginning. “We found no sign of a child on that ship. There was nothing in his quarters except that big glass box.”

“Not a box, Jack. A tank.”

“He kept her in a tank? Like a pet fish?”

“Very similar, yes.”

“What is she, then?”

Beverly smiled, and seemed almost sad. She placed one hand on the door at the end of the hallway, for they had suddenly reached the end, and said, “She is the key to all of this, Jack, the key and the reason.” She pushed open the door and went in.

Pasternak was a good sailor, a steady hand on a rope and a good shot with the musket he had slung over his shoulder. He’d never really picked up more than the rudiments of swordplay, but it wouldn’t have helped him in the end. He was keeping a lookout just inside the treeline, whistling and leaning against a tree. The forest was dark and spooky and it stayed resolutely still when his guts were insisting that the land itself should be heaving up and down, and yet he was much happier staring into its gloom than he was having to look at that creepy, unholy house.

Sameen had been crewing on ships since she was five. She’d been loyal to Jack Crawford through a lot of things, but the way Will Graham had talked about the real nature of the soul, the animal core of humanity, had stirred something in her she’d previously only felt when firing a cannon into crowded deck or seeing the blood fly as she swung her heavy sword. So she’d joined Will and the others on the trip into the jungle and there she’d drunk a brew of blood and old world magic and she’d felt the potentiality grow inside her. The smell of night had been richer, meat more savoury, and fucking so much more. The others had been the

same, and they'd seen in their own reflections eyes that had once looked out of the dark at primitive people huddled around the first fire. Now she was free and running through the forest and soon she would be red of tooth and claw.

Ignacio was a good kid, son of someone who had sailed with Jack many years ago and sent their son to him to learn the ways of the sea. He was earnest, friendly, and well-liked. He clutched his pike and looked around nervously at the forest and the awesome moon looming over the mountains. He was about to die badly.

Igor had signed up for a cruise aboard the *Quo Bella* because, he figured, there was no money in piracy any more, so why not try the other side. He'd lied about his past, said he was a former privateer without a war to profit from. He'd heard that Jack had once had a first mate who couldn't be messed with, but, well, she was dead and old Jack wasn't quite the lion of yesteryear. Igor was a practical man, or at least he thought of himself as such. In reality, he was lazy and cruel and greedy and utterly in love with the sea. He'd recognized Will for what he was, and had convinced a couple other former pirates, Yasmin and Peytr, on Jack's crew to follow him into Will's orbit.

Simran and Arjun were Lascars, sailors who'd shipped out of Calcutta on a British East Indiaman and become friends despite the gulf in their backgrounds. The white men aboard those ships could barely tell the difference between Sikh and Hindu, nevermind Punjab and Goa, and they'd found a bond in that. A bond which had seen them well after they were shipwrecked on some desolate isle north of Madagascar and those white men set to eating each other. Jack had rescued them while chasing a pirate and they'd happily sailed with him since.

O'Sullivan was an Irish renegade, and he carried within him a hatred of the Union Jack and red-coated soldiers. That hatred had almost gotten him a short rope and a sudden drop until Jack Crawford had taken him aboard and redirected that hate to all the English pirates infesting the Caribbean. But when Will had spoken about the old things living the wild places at the edges of the world, it had woken something in O'Sullivan, something nurtured by stories of the Sidhe and the standing stones and the rest he'd heard as a child in half-understood Gaelic. Now he one of those stories, a free thing ready to howl at the moon and lap up blood.

Anna had run away to sea to find her lover Billy, leaving behind a noble house and steamy scandal in London. She'd found Billy in a Tortuga whorehouse and kicked him out a third story window. Deciding she rather liked the sea and wishing to avoid being locked up in a French prison for murder she'd signed up for the *Quo Bella.* Or rather she'd snuck aboard and had made herself a valued hand before anyone had realized.

Zeller was a good sailor and a good boatswain, but he wasn't a soldier and he wasn't a werewolf hunter. He'd deployed his five sailors as best he could to stand guard, but the night was dark and sharp. He was considering sending a runner down to the ship to ask for reinforcements when he caught a gleam of eyes in the dark. He raised his musket and opened his mouth to speak.

O'Sullivan came bounding out of the dark with a snarling, drooling howl from his misshapen jaws. He slammed Pasternak aside with one furred shoulder and leapt straight for Zeller.

Ignacio jumped in front of Zeller with his pike held up. The point gouged a line across O'Sullivan's belly and the werewolf howled. He collided with Ignacio and they went sprawling in a tangle.

Pasternak began to scream as Sameen and Igor dragged him out of the lanternlight and began pulling him apart.

Simran shot Petyr as he charged out of the dark, and Arjun stabbed him through the heart before he could rise. Petyr screamed and clawed at the earth while he died.

Ignacio screamed, too. O'Sullivan was on top of him and ripping out his guts in gory, rubbery chunks.

Yasmin was stalking Anna and Anna was aiming at Yasmin. Anna fired and missed and Yasmin pounced but Zeller shot her out of the air. He rushed forward to finish off the wounded werewolf but Brown stepped out from behind a tree and clubbed Zeller across the head with the butt of a musket.

Anna choked down furious sobs as she reloaded her musket. She wouldn't reload it in time.

Yasmin was joined by Sameen and Igor and the three blood-soaked wolves began to circle the two men, snarling low.

Anna raised her musket and Brown shot her. Blood arced in the moonlight and Anna screamed in pain and anger she fell. Her blood pooled in the grass, mingling with Ignacio's.

Igor leapt at Arjun but the Lascar danced aside and slashed Igor across the face. He stepped back too far and Yasmin seized his ankle and tore his hamstring apart. Simran fired his half-reloaded musket at Yasmin from point blank. Burning powder seared her flesh and set her fur alight. She dropped Arjun with a keening yelp and ran into the night.

Arjun was down and bleeding. Simran's musket was empty but he held it like a club and stood over his friend, staring down the wolves.

Brown dropped his empty musket and drew a pair of pistols. He pointed them at Simran. "Surrender, and you can live."

Simran spat at him, said something harsh and cursive in Hindi.

Brown shrugged and pointed his pistols at Arjun. "It really makes no difference to me. I'd happily kill you all and let my brothers and sisters here feast on your flesh."

Will, who hadn't stirred from his seat beneath a tree, stood up and walked over. The wolves made way for him, and he stroked their muzzles gently. He stood next to Brown and said, "I have no quarrel with you, any of you. But you are in my way. So stand aside, and I will show you mercy." He smiled bitterly. "More mercifully than you ever treated any honest pirate."

Simran licked his lips and looked sideways at the wolves prowling around him and brushed past Will's hip. "This is foolish. Even if you kill us here, you can't take the whole ship, can't

sail it with two men and those... *things*."

Will smiled again. "I have no intention of taking Jack's beauty away from him. Quite the reverse. But he will bring something out of the palace, something I need. So put down the gun. Save your friends' lives." He glanced back at where Anna was lying in the grass. O'Sullivan had finished ripping Ignacio apart and now he was sniffing around Anna's head. She groaned, and fumbled with her one working arm for a gun, a knife, a rock.

Simran looked at her, too, looked at where Zeller lay still but breathing, looked down at Arjun. His shoulders slumped and he dropped the musket. Igor, half his face hanging off and bone shining wetly in the moonlight, snarled and prepared to pounce. Simran faced death resolutely, but Will grabbed the wolf by the pack of the neck and shook him. They stared each other down, and then Igor hung his head and slunk away.

Will pointed at Arjun, at Anna, and at Zeller and then to a fallen tree nearby whose branches formed a crude lean-to. Simran began moving them there, began bandaging their wounds as best he could. The wolves set to eating the dead. Will stood just outside the polygon of light cast from the mansion's doors. Brown stood beside him and rested one hand on his shoulder, but Will didn't seem to notice.

The old oak door swung open easily on polished hinges and they went through. The room beyond was octagonal and oak-panelled and filled with concentric rings of museum displays or maybe trophy cases. But they weren't what Jack noticed first. The windows were raised high on the walls and the moonlight came from a steep angle on the left, leaving long shadows that fused and mingled the trophies into bizarre silhouettes. He looked back into the hallway behind, where the moonlight shone directly down from above. He felt dizzy.

Beverly pushed the door closed and it seemed to merge with the wall like it had never been there. She smiled sympathetically. "Time is weird, Jack."

"Everything here is weird."

"Oh, I meant... nevermind." Jack had walked off into the rings of trophy cases with a strange expression. Beverly took a deep breath and followed. Her wings brushed dust off the cases and stirred up a swirling wake of motes dancing in the light that passed around and through and between her.

Jack smelled gunsmoke and salt air and heard cannonfire and screams and tasted the iron tang of blood. He passed cases filled with swords and guns and skulls and bones and pieces of ships and scraps of flags and melted lumps of metal. Until he found an arm. It looked fresh, almost, a trifle blue and swollen from time in the water but not rotten, not chewed upon except where great serrated teeth had severed it from the body that it had once been part of. There was a scar, a small burn on the thumb and forefinger. Jack was standing and staring at it when Beverly caught up.

Jack turned to her and said, with a dreadful flatness to his voice, "Has it always been him. Has he been following me across the world all these years."

Beverly looked at the arm and was quiet for a moment. "I don't think I ever met her. Before my time."

Jack nodded. "Miriam Lass. Also once of the Royal Navy. Good sailor, good officer. We lost her off Madagascar. We were chasing a pirate around the Horn, it's when we found Simran and Arjun, actually. I sent her in the cutter to flush out the pirate, chase him into our guns. We found the cutter the next day, blown apart. Everyone on board went into the water, the sharks got them. This arm, Miriam's arm, was all we found of her. We always assumed the pirates ambushed them."

Beverly shook her head. "There's a door, back there in the hall of mirrors. The *Ripper* took her, I watched them do it. Hannibal left her arm and took the rest."

"And made her death a nightmare, I'm sure."

"Oh, no, quite the opposite. He made her life one. And she's still living it."

Jack rounded on her so suddenly she started back a step. "She's alive. Miriam Lass is alive. He kept her alive all this time... and I gave up on her, I left her to him."

"Oh, you've done much more than just left her, Jack. He didn't just lock her in a hole somewhere. He changed her, and then he put her in a place where something interesting would happen. Don't blame yourself for not recognizing her, Jack. She's grown a bit since last you saw her."

Horror, dawning horror, spread across Jack's face. "Scylla. Oh, god, that was Miriam."

"It was, Jack. She recognized you, knew your ship. She just wanted to reach out to you, and you shot her and you stabbed her and you burned her." She grinned, sarcastic and lopsided, and chuckled low. "And she's hungry, Jack, so hungry. And now she's angry."

"Damn you," Jack whispered, then, louder, "Damn you! You're not Beverly, not the Beverly I knew—ack!"

Beverly had seized him by the throat and lifted him off the ground. Wriggling things crawled around the spaces where her bod y had once joined together. Her wings flared out behind her, smashing a pair of display cases and sending their contents skittering away. "Oh, but I am, Jack. I'm the Beverly who served and who died for you, who died just because Hannibal wanted to see what you would do. And what did you do? You bound me here, Jack, your self-indulgent anger and shame tied me here so I could follow you around like a shadow of guilt, so I could be forced to wander this place and see all the horrid things here, you did that, just like you doomed Miriam to become a monster and Bella to a single, looping memory. You hold us here, DAMN YOU." She dropped him to the floor and drew a shuddering breath. "Let me go, Jack. Once you have the skull, let me go. Let me rest."

Jack hauled himself up, leaning on the case with Miriam's arm. He didn't notice the way the fingers wiggled and tried to reach for him. "I'm sorry, Beverly, I truly am. I had no idea." He rubbed his thumb across his forehead. "This is... all this..." He gestured at the palace around them and shrugged wordlessly, unable to properly express the enormity of weird.

“I know, Jack, I know. And it’s not all your fault. You kept me from crossing over, but it takes a sea-goddess to make a psychopomp. Come on. There’s one door left.”

On the *Quo Bella*, Price sat up and groaned. His head ached, his hair crusted with blood. He shook with pain, and with fury.

Telling scary stories while the sun is up

Chapter Summary

A flash-forward. Jack has a visitor who'd like to know the story.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bermuda, August, 1732

The afternoon sun is like a physical pressure on Jack's closed eyes, an indescribable light that blossoms somewhere deep inside. The sand is warm, soft, supportive, embracing. He reaches out with mind and breath, extending himself out into the brilliant summer day. High above, gulls call and wheel. The wind walks in from the sea, rustling the tall grasses above the waterline like a conductor gathering the attention of an orchestra still tuning up and carries with it the promise of rain in the evening. The surf pounds and roars and slithers up and down the sand, rhythmic and hypnotic, a massage for the knots and aches of the soul. And, faintly, almost subconsciously, beyond that, the distant and comforting creak and warp of ships at dock, the soft rustle of voices occasionally spiked with a laugh, a shout, a song. Jack feels as though it is all melting away, as though he is melting away, subdividing down into mere sensory awareness so that he might come loose and be absorbed by sand and tide and time. Let all the things he's seen stay behind like flotsam after a storm.

And then...

Boots, the soft grind-slide of boots in loose sand. The rustle of fabric and the quiet exertion of walking in boots on loose sand.

Jack feels that sublime looseness vanish, shrivel away. The comforting blanket pressure of the sun becomes the hard weight of a stone on his chest, a stone made of memories of blood, of death, of monsters and impossible lightning and a ship being sucked down, down, down, two figures on the prow like figureheads, nailed to their fate by their own natures.

"Jack Crawford? Captain Jack Crawford?" A woman's voice, soft but not meek. The voice asks a question fully confident in already knowing the answer. A begrudging allowance to the niceties of society.

Jack opens his eyes, blinks away the dancing spots and strange colours the sun has left behind, rises to elbows and turns to face the voice. A woman, dressed in a fine gown with flat-soled boots of leather. The dress is fine, yes, but stained by sun and salt and while it suits her well, while she wears it well, she does not wear it with practice-polished grace. The boots, those are worn easily, naturally. The dress was chosen for her, Jack thinks, and she wears it not with the long-trained instincts of a woman for whom fashion is a way of life but

because someone has told her it looks well and she accepts this as fact. She has callouses on her hands, and ink stains. Her hair is long, a curly, wavy mass that dances around her shoulders and catches the eye. The wind gusts and flutters that hair up so that for a moment she has a halo of soft black waves the suns give rich deep gold hints to. A long, oval face with high cheekbones and a serious mouth, and the fading scraps of sunburn across her nose. Her eyes are darkest brown and they regard him calmly, seriously, a cool and steady regard. "I need you to help me find someone," she says.

Jack sighs, a deep sigh that sucks that rock on his chest deeper into his body. He feels the ache in hips and the bow of spine as his very bones bend to make room for it. "I'm sorry," he says flatly, trying not to let the ache walk through his words. "I don't do that anymore." He thinks of making an excuse, but those dark, serious eyes will not allow it. He turns back to the sea, still on his elbows. He is too bone-tired for the proprieties of rising for a stranger, for a lady. And he is sure the woman has no use for such proprieties either.

She says nothing, just hesitates a moment then sits near him, crossing her legs and letting the gown spread around her. Jack feels the strange pull of those niceties again, unwritten, unspoken rules that say she is too far away for a conversation, far enough to be awkward, but he sees none of that awkwardness in her. That is simply the physical space she prefers, a plain fact that cares nothing for those rules.

They sit in silence, the simple, honest silence of two people with nothing to say. Jack watches the waves roll in, and as always comes unbidden the memory of watching a different sea, a cold and grey sea far away, with his mother. He remembers her leaning down to him, the tips of her hair brushing his shoulder, his ear, as she points out to the sea and tells him to watch and count, for every seventh wave is the largest. He watches, and he counts, and, as always, he cannot tell if it is true or not, if he sees it or not, if it is a thing that can be real beyond the endless human need to impose patterns on the untouchable, ever-changingly unchanging noise of the world.

"I need you to help me find someone," she says at last. The words pass through him, each one quiet and unemotional but moving with the terrible inertia of raw truth, of plain facts clearly stated. She does need him. She needs *him*. She needs to find someone. He's going to try and convince her she doesn't, convince himself, but he already knows how this day will end. "I know you have seen... things. You've been through the Catatumbo Lightning. You've opened a door that you can't walk back through." Again, facts. Plainly and simply spoken. When she speaks again, her voice is quieter, and for the first time he hears behind it an ache that he has heard before, that he has felt and feels every morning and every evening and every quiet moment of every day. "I've walked through a door like that. And... and if I can find her, maybe we can still walk back through together." She knows she can't, and he knows it, but the ache demands otherwise.

“Are you sure,” he says, flat, drained of feeling. “That world, when you see it… it sees you, too. And it does not blink.”

“I’m sure.”

“If you know about the Lightning, then you must know how it ended, what happened to Will Graham.”

“I do.”

“And you still want to go down that path?”

“Yes.” He can feel her watching him, feel those luminous almond eyes. “Why did you help him, Will Graham? Did you know how that would end?”

He forces a shuddering sigh, purging the heaviness in his lungs. “Have you… have you ever grieved for a life you never lived without regretting the live you have lived? Do you know what it’s like to sacrifice a piece of your inner self, of your soul, for the sake of that outer life?”

He looks back to her. Her gaze is inward, lips pursed in thought. At length, she nods slowly. “Yes, I think I do. Do you?”

“No. No, I have been lucky to be certain in myself. But Will… it broke him in the end. I looked into him, before I pulled him out of that cell. I learned about the life he lived before he ever boarded the *Chesapeake Ripper*. He couldn’t… no, he wasn’t *allowed* to reconcile the outer with the inner and it drove him into the arms of someone who turned him into a monster.”

“And you took him back to that monster.”

“I did… I did. In the end, I think that was the only place he could be, the only way he could truly *be*. Even in becoming he ended.”

“And you took him back there.”

Jack laughs without humour. “He took himself. But I… I suppose I opened the door for him.”

“So, then, what happened? After you went into the Lightning, I mean. I’ve heard stories about what happened to the *Ripper* in the end, but I don’t know what happened in between.”

Jack heaves himself up, brushes sand from his breeches, and offers a hand to the woman. “Come on, I’ll tell you on the walk down to the ship. What should I call you, by the way?”

She takes his hand and rises but hesitates at his question. “You can call me Eve,” she says.

“Well, Eve, beyond the Lightning is another… world, I suppose. And there we found a whole palace that Lecter had built to hold his secrets, and it was there that…”

Chapter End Notes

shows up four years late with updates Heyyyy anybody else still into Hannibal? I hope so :P

So I'm gonna do my best to finally finish this, but, uh I have no memory of where I was going with it and I at no point wrote an outline so I guess we're gonna go on a voyage of discovery together.

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